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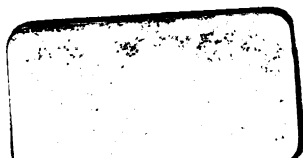
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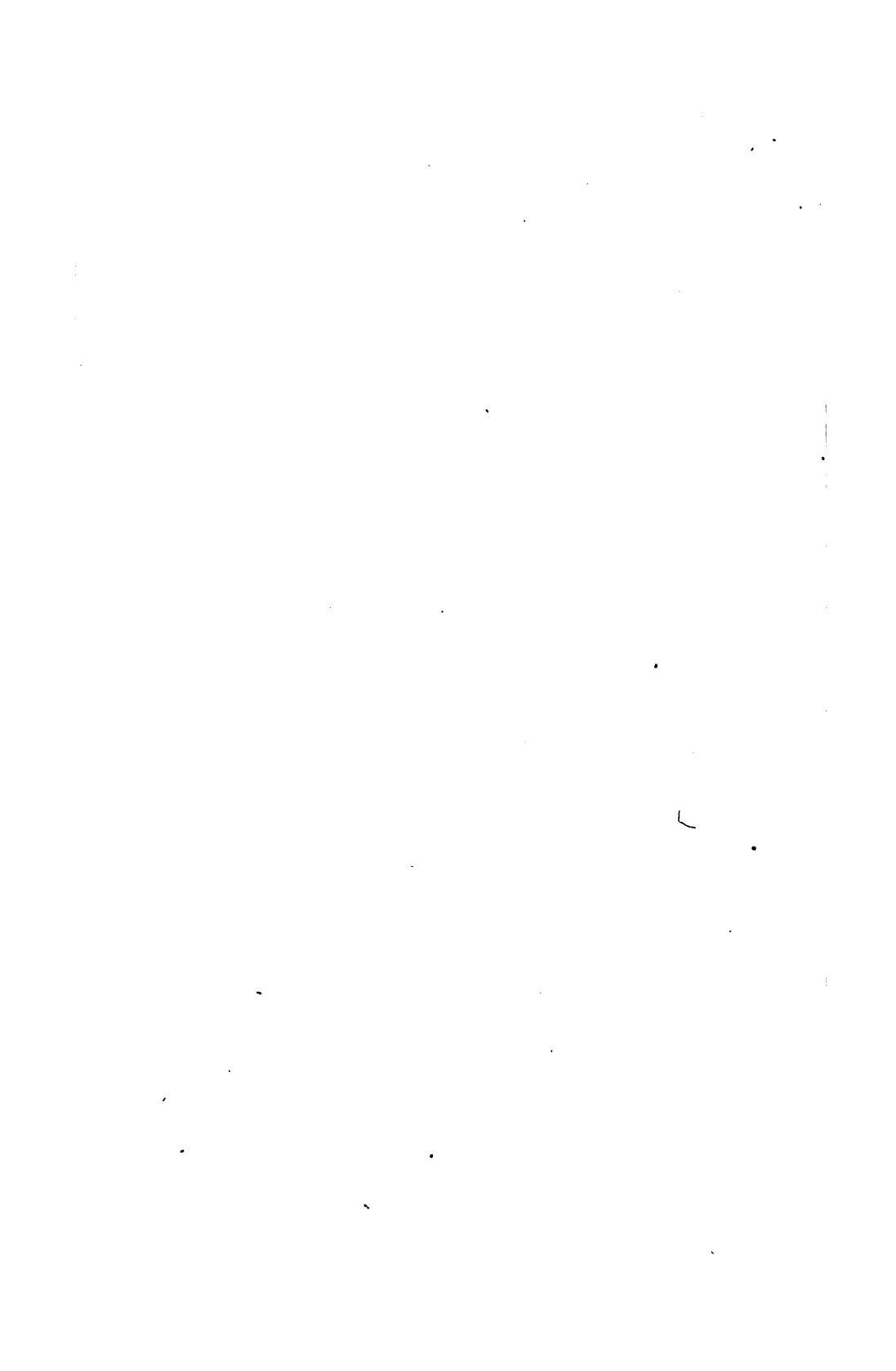
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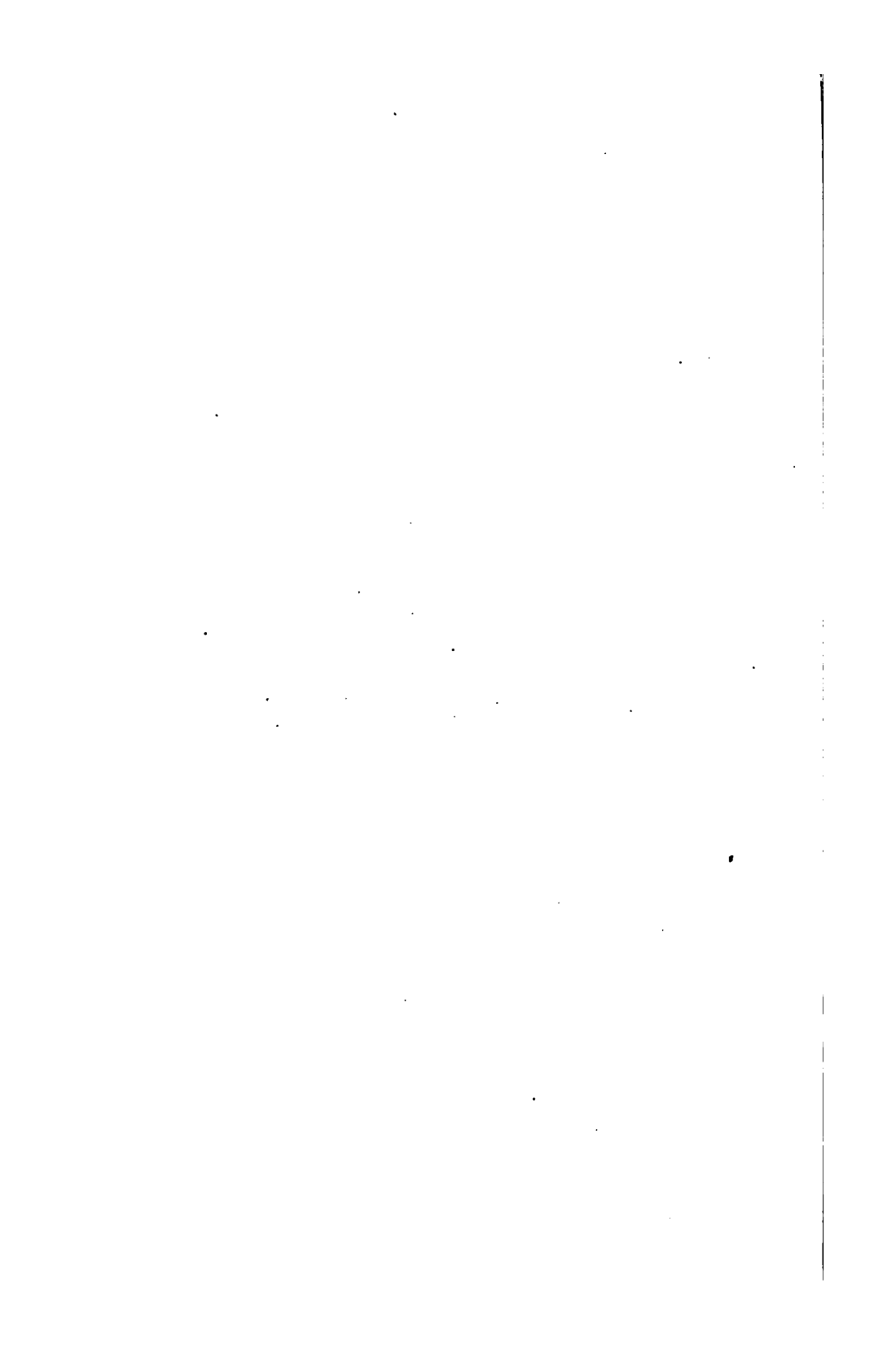




THE MILDMAYES

OR

THE CLERGYMAN'S SECRET.



THE MILDMAYES

OR

THE CLERGYMAN'S SECRET

A Story of Twenty Years Ago.

BY

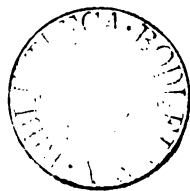
DANBY NORTH.

"What hath come to thee? In thy hollow eye,
"And hueless cheek, and thine unquiet motions,
"Sorrow, and shame, and conscience seem at war
"To waste thee."

BYRON'S *Marino Faliero*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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THE MILDMAYES ;

OR,

THE CLERGYMAN'S SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

CAROLINE MILDMAVE kept to herself, as much as possible, the idea that there was something weighing on the mind of her cousin Eustace, and she avoided saying aught upon the subject to her sister Louisa. The latter, however, of herself remarked that she thought that Eustace had grown much graver than was usual with him, and attributed it to his sojourning amongst so many strangers, and a desire to keep up due professional gravity ; but

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whether he was graver or not, the general company assembled at Belvyddyr joined in admiring his eminently sweet and placidly beautiful face, and Fanny Bunbury laboured hard to entangle him in the labyrinth of a flirtation.

But all would not answer. Eustace had only one woman in his eye, with whose lot he was anxious to be bound up in life. Caroline Mildmaye filled his heart and imagination with all the 'raptures and tender imaginings of love. During the time that he had acted the part of a religious comforter to her, on the decease of her father, she had made an impression on his mind not to be erased, and the only object of earthly happiness that he courted was the possession of her heart and hand.

Eustace was poor : his curacy, though a perpetual one, was not sufficient for more than his own maintenance as a gentleman ; and if she had been rich, like Miss Tufton or Fan Bunbury, his grace and fascinating manners were such that the match might not be disproportioned. But "to marry two poor cousins together would be a bad arrangement of Fortune's cards," thought

Mrs. St. Pierre to herself,—for that lady, eminently accomplished in all the symptoms of lovers' feelings, had leaped to the conclusion that there was at least an understanding of some kind between Caroline and her cousin; and she was not at all pleased to discover, or think that she had discovered, that Eustace Mildmaye was a suitor for the hand of his charming cousin, and like a true matchmaker, with the most benevolent intentions, she resolved that each of them should be better provided for. She hoped to bring matters to such a point, that Miss Tufton might be Mrs. Eustace Mildmaye, or perhaps Fan Bunbury would answer. On the other hand, she set her heart upon Caroline becoming Lady Vaughan Gwynne.

But it is not so easy to dispose of human hearts, after all. Caroline, on the day before that on which Lord Rockforest was expected, was walking in what was called the eastern shrubbery with her cousin. It was in the evening, at sunset, and the landscape, always singularly beautiful, never looked lovelier. The blue mountains that stretched far away to the

east, and raised their peaked summits to the sky, contrasted strongly with the vivid green of the extensive woods of Belvyddyr. Before their sight, in front lay the vale of Belvyddyr, with its cottages, its homesteads, and two village spires ; while to the west the ocean view presented a noble and sublime expanse of the waste of waters. Caroline, softened by the scene, the hour, perhaps by the thoughts of other times that the conversation of Eustace had been recalling to her, was moved to deeper feeling than was even usual with her, though her general current of thought was tenderly emotional and exquisitely feminine.

“ Yes ! ” said Eustace, “ it is a glorious view. With what charms Nature has decked the scene ! How saddening—how depressing it is to think that our daily life is not always covered with so much beauty and glory, as these works of nature ! ”

“ Do you know, Eustace, ” cried Caroline, in her sweet low voice, that fell like music on the ear, “ that I think there is something pressing on your mind ? I have seen you look very grave since you

came to Belvyddyr. Does anything weigh heavily upon your mind?"

"No, there does not; at least not in the sense in which you put the question. And yet, dearest Caroline, there is something that at times sits heavily on me. I am not envious, nor am I inclined to repine at my poverty; but it is when I behold the splendours of wealth and station that I feel, clergyman and Christian though I be, that I cannot well aspire to win the hand of her, the love of whose heart I would prize as the greatest of earthly good."

He spoke in a soft, subdued tone. Her eyes were cast upon the ground, and when Eustace turned to look upon her as he spoke the last sentence, he observed a pensive shade on her face, and ever so faint a blush steal over her features.

They walked together in silence for a few minutes. It was a period of great suspense to Eustace. He knew not whether he had done wisely, in recurring to an avowal of his sentiments for his cousin by his side. The silence was first broken by her. Had you been near her, gentle

reader, you could scarcely have heard her low small voice as it murmured in a whisper-like sound from her lips, with a faint and tremulous tone,

"I suppose, Eustace, you think that I am only to be enamoured of wealth and station, and that personal qualities could never obtain my consideration. You do me great injustice."

"I did not mean that," replied he. "I only wished, as I often do, that I was rich in those worldly goods which would make me, in common acceptation, a fitting suitor for your hand."

"I thought you had agreed not to resume the conversation that we had some months since near the hurst at Rosebank, until some time should pass away."

Eustace pleaded forgetfulness ; the anxiety of a lover, and the influence which the company, without third parties being present, of Caroline had upon him for his deviation from the compact. Caroline spoke with feeling, and with something like tenderness towards him. There was little in her words ; but a certain pathos in her manner encouraged Eustace to be

of good cheer, and take hope that they would one day be united ; and rather pleased than otherwise, he returned along with her to the house.

Who would have thought, as the cousins entered through one of the tall windows from the garden, that they had held so interesting a conversation as had passed between them ? Even Mrs. St. Pierre, for the time, was lulled in her suspicions, and paid no particular observation to the fact of the stroll of her cousins along the eastern shrubbery. She listened with complaisant pride to the raptures of the young clergyman, as he described in glowing language the sunset that Caroline and he had been viewing.

After tea had been discussed, while some of the party were listening to the chatter of Fan Bunbury, and others were attending to the light and brilliant playing of Louisa Mildmaye upon the piano, Mrs. St. Pierre and Eustace chanced to be seated closely to each other in one of the corners of the room. Mrs. St. Pierre was remarking how well Louisa played, and what an accomplished pair of girls the two Mildmayes were.

"Yes," said Eustace, "they are very accomplished indeed ; and the remarkable cultivation of their minds has been of the greatest use to them during their fall from prosperity."

"And their talents, with their beauty, may be the sources of their rise again. With their personal and mental accomplishments combined, these girls ought to make great matches."

"Ah !" said Eustace, "I doubt it. They have not the position required for making what the world calls brilliant marriages. They cannot, my dear Mrs. St. Pierre, habitually move in that sphere of society where great matches are to be met with."

"But they *shall* have that position," said Mrs. St. Pierre, in a low voice, but with great energy of manner. "That is a subject on which Mr. St. Pierre desired me this very day to inform you that he is very desirous of conversing with you. He is perfectly prepared to give Caroline and Louisa ample fortunes, provided that they make such marriages as can be approved of by Mr. St. Pierre and myself."

"Such conduct is very handsome in-

deed, and I am truly rejoiced to hear it," cried Eustace.

He was not so very rejoiced after all, for even while his words of acknowledgment came from his lips, he instinctively felt that Mrs. St. Pierre would not be likely to give her consent that Caroline should marry a curate like himself. However, he did his best to appear rejoiced at the intelligence given him by Mrs. St. Pierre, who continued the conversation.

"And, indeed, I may tell you that I am most anxious that both the girls should sojourn with us entirely, and that they should take up their permanent abode at Belvyddyr, until they are settled for life by marriage. There is always a stream of visitors, many of them of high rank, flowing through Belvyddyr, and it is not unlikely that our sweet "rival sisters" would be eligibly provided for, by union with some of the good matches to be met with here. I am quizzed by all my friends on the number of people that I have got married from Belvyddyr. Mr. Wilmot has christened it 'Hymen Hall.'"

Eustace laughed, and made some com-

mon-place remarks upon matchmaking. Mrs. St. Pierre continued :

“ What would you say if Caroline were Lady Vaughan Gwynne before a few months rolled by ? ”

The question completely startled, and by its suddenness amazed, the curate, whose looks of surprise were closely noted by Mrs. St. Pierre. He stammered, hesitated, and at last said,

“ I should, indeed, be very much surprised. ”

“ I can tell you, then, ” said Mrs. St. Pierre, “ that very much more surprising things have come to pass. But not a word of what we have been talking about. Let not so much as a hint drop from your lips about what I have been saying to you about the fortunes, till all is settled ; nor say anything about who is likely to be Lady Gwynne. By the way, talking of ‘ ladies,’ Louisa tells me that you have been called in to attend Lady Rockforest. ”

“ Yes, I have, ” cried Eustace, evidently not pleased at Mrs. St. Pierre’s apparent disposition to catechise him about the resident at Catesby Court.

"She is," continued Mrs. St. Pierre, "a very extraordinary personage, and always was so. Ah, I remember her in other and happier days. Perhaps you are not aware that Mrs. George Mildmaye was a great friend at one time of Lady Rockforest." Then lowering her voice to a whisper, she added, significantly, "The world used to say that it was Mrs. George Mildmaye who accidentally discovered something wrong about the conduct of Lady Rockforest, and that it was she who first began to talk her down."

"I have heard as much," said Eustace; "but one hears so many things, that it is difficult to believe all that one hears."

"You may believe so much," said Mrs. St. Pierre. "It was the mother of your cousins that first branded Lady Rockforest, and raised the voice of scandal against her. The circumstances were, I have heard, somewhat curious; but I own that I do not know them accurately."

"And Lord Rockforest is to be here on to-morrow?" said Eustace, desirous to divert the conversation into a channel somewhat different.

"Yes," said Mrs. St. Pierre. "There is something strange in the daughters of Mrs. George Mildmayer and the son of Lady Rockforest meeting each other. Who knows, perhaps the families may be yet allied."

"Heaven forbid!" cried Eustace, in a tone of deep solemnity, which almost startled Mrs. St. Pierre. She looked at the young clergyman with astonishment, and said,

"Well, cousin Eustace, since I saw Miss O'Neil in *Belvidera*, I never heard such a tragic exclamation. What do you mean by it? Do you know aught against Lord Rockforest that should make you invoke Divine protection against him?"

"Oh! I beg a hundred pardons," said Eustace; "I was really thinking at the time of marriages made merely for wealth, without the heart being engaged in them." And he gave a slightly affected laugh.

Mrs. St. Pierre looked at him rather intently; whether she thought his explanation satisfactory or not, did not then appear, as she was called away by a message from Mr. St. Pierre.

On that night, when the Mildmays girls had retired to their apartments, they loitered for some time before going into their sleeping-chambers, and sat down talking in the "blue-room," that divided their bedrooms.

"Do you know, Caroline," said Louisa, "that I am most anxious to see the new visitor expected here to-morrow?"

"Why so?" said Caroline.

"Oh, I really can't tell. But I have a sort of a *feel* about me—you know what I mean—that he must be worth knowing. Lady Rockforest is such an extraordinary personage; at least, she has been always so described, and she played such a strange part, that I am almost certain her son cannot be an ordinary man."

"I think that Eustace, somehow or other, does not like Lord Rockforest's coming here at all. Perchance he knows some family secrets about him," said Caroline, laughing.

"Oh, if there were any secret about him," replied Louisa, "it would make me only ten times more desirous to know something of him. If he should only turn out

to be a fit hero for a chapter in the 'Romance of the Peerage,' what an interesting visitor we should have!"

"There is not much chance of that," said Caroline: "but however, I am glad to have the chance of seeing a man of such fashionable celebrity. What a pity," she continued, "that Mr. Wilmot has not a good fortune! He would become it well. I like his society very much. I hope that he will not depart before we go away."

"Ah! Well, I can't say," said Louisa, "that I would miss him very much. To be sure, he can be very agreeable, and has many accomplishments, but I should like more force of character. I think him greatly inferior to Sir Vaughan Gwynne."

"Ah! but if he were Sir Henry Wilmot, of Llangaer Castle, and Sir Vaughan were plain Mr. Gwynne, an Assistant Poor-Law Commissioner, then perhaps you would find that the force of character was in Wilmot. Don't you know, Louisa," continued Caroline, "that rank and consequence bring out points of character with great force. In Mr. Wilmot's subordinate

position, he cannot take a very high or leading tone in society."

"Oh, well," said Louisa, with a toss of her head, "let him make himself a man of consequence! Why does he not go to the Bar, and enter Parliament, and become a social celebrity, and help to push on the age?"

"Things easier said than done, my girl," replied Caroline, laughingly. "You talk of a man becoming a social celebrity as easily as if it were like going up in a balloon; of getting into Parliament, as if it were only like asking for a ticket to some ball; and of pushing on the age, as if it were only like driving a curricule. You forget that Mr. Wilmot has no money: he is obliged to accept an immediate provision, and take the chapter of accidents for rising in the world."

"Well, being a Poor-Law Commissioner must be very dull work to a man of brilliancy—and I admit that Mr. Wilmot has something of brilliancy in his manners and appearance; but still, don't you think him inferior to Sir Vaughan Gwynne?"

"Sir Vaughan is too stiff, too stern, too

authoritative for my taste," replied Caroline; "his praises have been so sounded by Mrs. St. Pierre, and I have such distrust of all paragons, that perhaps I do him injustice. I do not like to hear people—to use a common phrase—puffed so much. I like myself to find out some of their good qualities. I recollect hearing you say, Louisa, that you did not like reading 'Childe Harold,' in that edition of it, where foot-notes at the bottom from Lord Jeffrey and Sir Egerton Brydges tell the reader to pause and admire; and in reading the people I meet with in life, I like to discern something of them myself. Perhaps that may be the reason why I do not like this Sir Vaughan Gwynne." And Caroline gave a terrible yawn as she mentioned his name, and cut short some praise of him that was rising to Louisa's lips, by reminding her of the lateness of the hour.

The sisters parted, and retired to their respective rooms. Were their feelings really uttered in the foregoing conversation? I am afraid that I must record that they did not speak all their sentiments. Caroline was only seeking an ex-

cuse with herself for her liking for her cousin Eustace, a match with whom, she well knew, would not be approved of by Mrs. St. Pierre, or by her sister Louisa, both of whom, for many reasons, she was most anxious not to annoy by making an injudicious marriage. There was something, however, of truth in the indifference which Caroline affected towards Sir Vaughan Gwynne; her pride and her caprice both alike disinclined her to the apparently "veni, vidi, vici" style in which the baronet appeared disposed to pay his addresses to her. On the other hand, when Louisa laid her head upon the pillow, she could not but feel that she had spoken of Wilmot in a way that did not accord with the real sentiments she entertained towards him. She really did admire him. His graceful manner, his clear intellect, and tone of refined elegance in conversation, had many attractions for her; and the suggestion of Caroline, that if Wilmot had been a baronet with a fortune, Louisa would have discovered more perfections in him, had something of truth. Not that she could be so hard, or coarse

in spirit, as to think only of his adventitious fortunes in the man to whom she might give her hand. No, Louisa Mildmaye would have made a runaway match as soon as Caroline—perhaps sooner, for her temper was more impetuous. The simple fact was, that Louisa had a more decided ambition than Caroline, and was, of the two, more anxious to be relieved from the pressure of narrow circumstances. Her own heart told her that she could be happy with Wilmot; and yet she capriciously coquetted with herself, and would not allow even to Caroline that there was much in Wilmot, that she really admired. Too often, thus, do women make shipwreck of their mortal happiness, by not calmly and seriously estimating the actual nature of their own feelings, without subterfuge in the sophistication of that fascinating *ignis fatuus*—the love of coquettish power.

CHAPTER II.

ON the next morning, as duly warned by Mrs. St. Pierre, Eustace had a long and interesting conversation with the invalid owner of Belvyddyr. Mr. St. Pierre distinctly stated his intention of giving the Mildmaye girls ten thousand pounds each, and also intimated his wishes that both of them should stay permanently at Belvyddyr, occasionally going up to London during the season, "until," he added, "they were well married."

Eustace was embarrassed at the news of Mr. St. Pierre's desiring to keep the Mildmaye sisters in his family circle. His heart at once divined all the difficulties that would interpose against a free correspondence between him and Caroline; and with

the jealous anxiety of a lover he feared also the dazzling effects upon a woman's heart of a continued sojourn in the splendours and high society of Belvyddyr. Mr St. Pierre was somewhat surprised at the apparent coldness with which his intentions were heard by Eustace, for little did he know what was passing at the time through the heart of the young clergyman. He was purse-proud, and, though well bred, had in his nature the pomposity of a great capitalist; for something of the haughty pride of a great man on 'Change still adhered to the great ex-banker's nature. Rich invalids often like to produce effect by the display of their hoards. In their broken health they doubly enjoy the visible power that money gives. It was so with Mr. St. Pierre, and he was much disappointed, not to say mortified, to find that Eustace Mildmaye was not thrown into raptures by the announcement of his plans.

"I had intended," said he, "to tell this young fellow that I would try and do what I could for him in the Church, but I don't think I shall, now."

On the other hand, Eustace, as well as the embarrassment of his contending emotions would allow him, took occasion to observe that it would require cautious management to deal with the Mildmayes sisters; that their proud spirits would be reluctant to accept such great favours; and that they would not perhaps be ready to comply with Mr. St. Pierre's desire of their sojourning under his roof until they were married. Eustace, poor and proud, was a bad diplomatist to urge points with a testy and wealthy invalid, not used to contradiction, and the interview lasted much longer than had been anticipated by Mr. St. Pierre: it took place towards the afternoon, after luncheon-time.

The Mildmayes, along with Miss Bunbury and some of the other lady-visitors, had taken after lunch a stroll up towards the large glen that opened from the eastern side of the park at Belvyddyr. The gentlemen staying at Belvyddyr had all gone to ascend the great mountain of Arrghwydd, and to report how far it was practicable for ladies.

Feminine small-talk in a rural party,

when there are no gentlemen, grows remarkably insipid, as I have often heard girls confess. Is it that scandal evaporates in the open air? Is it that talk about bonnets, lace, and all that pretty flimsy trumpery with which women "disfigure themselves into the fashion," grows tiresome and trivial in presence of the bright verdure, the rushing stream, the winding glen, and the great blue mountain with the mist curling round its summit? Whatever be the cause, it is absolutely certain that ladies' walking-parties in the country are apt to be very dull.

It was the case with the walking-party that set out from Belvyddyr upon that day. They were returning rather fagged, and more *ennuyés* than tired, and were coming slowly enough through the park, when Fan Bunbury cried out,

"So-ho, there! I spy game. Behold one of the new guests coming towards us, with Mrs. St. Pierre."

The Mildmayes looked in the direction in which Fanny Bunbury pointed, and saw a gentleman by the side of Mrs. St. Pierre, who was apparently indicating to

him the chief features in the prospect that extended before them. She advanced slowly in the direction of the walking-party, and in a few minutes the new-comer, Lord Rockforest, was presented to the Mildmayes.

Lord Rockforest was not an ordinary-looking man. On the contrary, his person and features were very remarkable. His complexion was swarthy, his features handsome, and his figure more powerful than graceful. He had the frame of an athlete, low in stature, but wide in his chest, and muscular in his limbs. His eyes were brilliantly black, and on the whole he might be pronounced a handsome man, were it not for a certain sinister air about his countenance that was the reverse of prepossessing.

The Mildmayes looked at Lord Rockforest with more interest and curiosity than they would have bestowed on him, if they had never seen or heard of Lady Rockforest, his mother; and whether it was that the new-comer was excessively struck with the appearance of the Mildmayes, or that he noticed the curiosity

exhibited by them, it is certain that Lord Rockforest regarded the sisters with considerable attention. He appeared a perfectly well-bred man, and conversed with ease, and on the first presentation was more successful in making advances in intimacy than is usual. He bestowed a fair amount of admiration on the scene before them, and, without falling into raptures, commended everything to the satisfaction of his hostess ; and when they arrived at the house, he had enhanced rather than diminished the curiosity of the Mildmayes about him. When the Mildmayes were by themselves in their sitting-room, just before they descended to the drawing-room before dinner, the following conversation took place between them :

“What a remarkable-looking man Lord Rockforest is !” said Louisa.

“A most singular-looking person indeed,” replied Caroline. “He is decidedly handsome ; and yet there is that about him which I do not like.”

“One is prejudiced against him by what is told about his madcap pranks—his knocking down policemen, and his fights

at gambling-houses, and above all, by the recollection of who is his mother."

"Yes; but I was not thinking of any of all that," said Caroline, "as I looked upon his face. I really forgot it all when those great black eyes stared—I should rather say glared—upon me. He is fierce-looking, and there is an unusual look about him that is very displeasing."

"And yet his manners," said Louisa, "are very gentlemanlike, so far as one could judge. What a fine voice he has! It is as good as Sir Vaughan Gwynne's. He and Sir Vaughan are both a sturdy-looking pair."

"The baronet is the more intellectual of the two in appearance," said Caroline, "and is doubtless so, too, in reality."

"What could you expect from him, come as he is from such a family, and from such a mother? But he certainly inherits Lady Rockforest's good looks and beauty, whatever may be her character, or her want of it. Come, let us go down to the drawing-room."

The company assembled quite agreed in opinion, though they did not all express

it, with the feeling of the Mildmayes upon the personal appearance of Lord Rockforest. He was regarded with general curiosity. His demeanour was sufficient in any case to have attracted attention ; and the notoriety of his gay and only too reckless life, as well as the recent discussions on a great race, at which a horse of Lord Rockforest's had become the winner, and ruined scores of persons, combined, with other causes of a purely personal kind, to make them interested in what related to a personage, who was just then occupying a good deal of public attention in one form or the other. It was evident, from the looks of the assembled party, that the newly-arrived visitor was scrutinised with uncommon interest.

Eustace Mildmaye had not yet made his appearance. After his long interview with Mr. St. Pierre in the morning, Eustace was saddened and disappointed. He felt, in the increased fortunes of his cousins, that there was an additional obstacle to a matrimonial alliance between Caroline and himself, and he knew that in any case he

should have to encounter opposition from Mr. and Mrs. St. Pierre, once that they had determined to espouse the interests of the Mildmaye girls, and advance them in the world. With these reflections he had not joined the other visitors to Belvyddyr, but had taken a long and solitary walk, the effect of which was to depress rather than raise his spirits, and he entered the drawing-room tired, and out of sorts.

Mrs. St. Pierre hastened to present him to the newly-arrived guest. As Eustace advanced into the drawing-room, where a group of two or three gentlemen were standing together, laughing heartily, and making the ladies near them also smile at a most amusing Chinese toy, representing the gambols of a tumbler,—

“Lord Rockforest,” said Mrs. St. Pierre, “allow me to present to you my esteemed kinsman, the Reverend Mr. Mildmaye.”

Lord Rockforest turned round, as Mrs. St. Pierre addressed him, and stood right in front of Eustace Mildmaye. They bowed to each other; but it was at once plain to the eyes of the Mildmaye sisters that there was a look of something like confusion,

or dismay, in the face of Eustace. And there *was* confusion in his mind ! Was it that he did not like the countenance of Lord Rockforest ? Was it that its sinister expression painfully reminded him of Lord Rockforest's noble and unhappy mother ? The dark eye, the bold, fierce, imperious gaze read in the form and face of the son, had certainly become exaggerated, and gave an air of coarse, truculent expression to the otherwise handsome face of Lord Rockforest.

Caroline Mildmaye looked with great interest at her cousin, as she observed this feeling of dissatisfaction, or surprise, or whatever it may have really been, come over his countenance. She had often, when in Kent, and living within the vicinity of Lady Rockforest, allowed her mind to dwell on the character of that hapless woman. She knew, indeed, little of the personal history of Lady Rockforest, but perhaps the very fact of her little knowledge of a person who had been the subject of so much painful gossip, and in whose habits there was confessedly not a little of the mysterious and the strange,

contributed to excite more interest about Lady Rockforest in the mind of Caroline Mildmaye. Even after leaving Boxgrove, and living in the retirement of Rosebank Cottage, when Lady Rockforest's carriage would pass the Mildmayes on one of their walking excursions, Caroline's fancy would be stimulated into action as she caught a momentary glance of the imperious though melancholy countenance of one then outlawed from virtuous society, though she had been in early life the grace of her own home, and one of the ornaments of the court circle. And now Caroline was in the very room with the son of that strange, guilty woman, whom she had so often looked upon with curiosity; and her cousin Eustace was there also, who was perhaps more versed in the history of Lord Rockforest's mother than he allowed himself to show.

To whatever cause it may have been owing, it was certain that a vast deal of attention was paid to Lord Rockforest, not only by Mrs. St. Pierre, but by all the company. Perhaps the fact of his mother being such a personage as she was, added

some piquant zest to the degree of attention which was paid to the noble lord. There was something out of the common in his antecedents, and his personal appearance and manners assisted in keeping up the interest which his parentage excited. Caroline Mildmaye, however, saw that there was no one in the whole house or company, who looked with more interest on Lord Rockforest than her cousin Eustace. Without his noticing the fact, she saw that Eustace, in company, always stealthily had his gaze directed towards the young peer, appearing as if he desired to read his very soul. He stared at the young nobleman more than politeness or good-breeding rendered at all allowable, and sometimes, when he was caught by his cousin in the act of so curiously staring at Lord Rockforest, she observed a blush of confusion come over his face, to be followed by a transient paleness.

On the other hand, during the first days of his visit at Belvyddyr, if Lord Rockforest found that he occupied the attention of the household, he in return saw

much to arrest him. The young peer regarded the Mildmaye girls with great interest, and Mrs. St. Pierre was pleased to look at the glance of pleasure which rose in the face of Lord Rockforest as Caroline and Louisa met his eyes.

The Mildmayes themselves found that there was something particular in the admiration that was paid to them both by the newly-arrived guest. Lord Rockforest evidently admired Caroline most, and was disposed to pay her much attention. He contrived to get near her at dinner, and to be close to her in the morning walk, and her woman's heart could not possibly mistake the expression that beamed in his eyes. The more she knew of him, the less disposed was she to admire him. He had not the least sympathy with any of the tastes or pursuits, in which Caroline would have liked her husband to be distinguished. His good qualities appeared to end in the courage and physical hardihood which he possessed, and in a vein of bold, open bluntness. Letters or refined culture had done little to improve the tone of his mind, or to

exalt his spirit, and Caroline felt that she would be infinitely happier in the cottage of Eustace Mildmaye, as his humble wife, than as the ennobled partner of the boisterous and sport-loving peer. But she was not disposed to think that there was anything serious in the attention with which Lord Rockforest appeared to observe her.

CHAPTER III.

ONE morning, six or seven days after the arrival of Lord Rockforest, while Caroline was in the garden with the ladies of Belvyddyr, Mrs. St. Pierre suddenly came out of the house, and said to her, in a quiet tone of voice,

“Caroline, I have something to show you here,” holding at the same time in her hand some newly-arrived patterns for Berlin-work. Scarcely had Caroline, however, approached near Mrs. St. Pierre, than the latter at once hastily said, “Go up to my boudoir, at once, my dear. I’ll follow you directly.”

Caroline did exactly as she was told. Having been useful about the schools at

Belvyddyr, she supposed, at first, that Mrs. St. Pierre wanted to ask her advice about work, and get her to modify or adapt some of the patterns that had come to her. She really did not think that she wanted to say anything of very great importance to her, and rather listlessly walked up to the boudoir, in obedience to the desire of Mrs. St. Pierre.

She had been there not above four minutes, while scanning the almost endless portraits of public characters with which Mrs. St. Pierre delighted to surround her private room, than the door suddenly opened, and was carefully closed by Mrs. St. Pierre, who, with a face radiant with joy, exulting with the intelligence of having something very pleasing to communicate, said,

“ Ah, Caroline ! My dearest girl, I have glorious news for you. Can you guess it ? ”

“ What is it, my dear Mrs. St. Pierre ? ” said Caroline, really surprised.

“ I see you can't, so I shall not keep you in suspense. Oh ! you are a most fortunate girl, and I must say that you

deserve your good fortune, and I always thought that you could not fail to marry well. Only think—my dear girl—that—Lord Rockforest has this day applied to me for permission to pay you his addresses, and has even further entreated me to use any little influence I may possess to forward the success of his suit.” Mrs. St. Pierre, in saying these words, threw her arms round Caroline, and embraced her with the greatest heartiness.

“Oh! it is quite impossible!” cried Caroline——

“Ah!” said Mrs. St. Pierre, “I knew that at first you would hardly be able to credit the good news; but so it is——”

“Oh, Mrs. St. Pierre, it never can be——”

“Ah! ha! my pretty sceptic, but it can be. After all, there is no miracle in a charming girl, with graces and accomplishments that it would be fulsome to praise in her presence, gaining the heart of a wealthy young peer.”

“Oh, but I mean that it can’t be at all possible——”

“Yes, but I mean that it is entirely

possible; for his own lips told me so half an hour since in the library."

Mrs. St. Pierre did not perceive that Caroline did not mean to express any incredulity in the fact of Lord Rockforest's proposal, and that Caroline only wanted to declare the utter impossibility of her consenting to accept Lord Rockforest. She resolved, therefore, to explain the matter in the most decisive way.

"My dear Mrs. St. Pierre, I should just as soon think of marrying your coachman or your huntsman, as to accept the hand of Lord Rockforest."

It was curious to look at the rapid alterations of countenance that took place in Mrs. St. Pierre as she heard these words fall from Caroline Mildmaye. Every trace of the joyful and the complaisant faded from her handsome, gracious face, which now looked very grave.

"Oh! Caroline, you are joking. You cannot be serious. What! refuse to listen to the proposals of a young peer with a splendid fortune? But, ah! I see how it is. You are doubtless prejudiced against Lord Rockforest by the unhappy career of

his mother. But recollect, my dear, that Lord Rockforest has not been educated by her, or brought up at all in her society. There has been every reasonable care taken of his education. I cannot really suppose it to be possible that you could reject an offer so calculated to cause you happiness."

"Alas!" said Caroline, "I never could be happy with such a man as Lord Rockforest. His person is well enough, though his countenance, you will own yourself, has a most forbidding expression, and sometimes has even something of the terrible in it. His manners are passable, and he may do in mixed society, but his mind is coarse and ignorant. He has seen several prize-fights, and patronises boxers, and such low persons; he reigns supremely a lord amongst jockeys—but also the merest jockey amongst lords. At present I despise him—if I were his wife, I should detest him."

Mrs. St. Pierre was much surprised at the decisive manner in which Caroline spoke. In fact, she had never before seen her display so much resolution, and even vehe-

mence of nature. For beneath the smooth, soft manners of Caroline there was a spirit of no common energy, once that external circumstances roused it into action. There was something, however, in the decision to which Caroline had come, or rather in the way in which she showed that decision, that did not please Mrs. St. Pierre. Like all persons of the Lady Bountiful species, Mrs. St. Pierre liked to have her pets and favourites of a somewhat yielding and trusting disposition; and she would have been more pleased if Caroline Mildmaye had exhibited a due portion of hesitation and embarrassment, ending by throwing herself upon the counsel and sympathy of the Lady Paramount of Belvyddyr. But such was not the case, and there was no mistaking the dislike to Lord Rockforest which was visible in the manner and words of Caroline Mildmaye.

Mrs. St. Pierre settled, therefore, to take things as they were, and leave Caroline to act for herself. She resolved, however, to sound Caroline about Sir Vaughan Gwynne, for it had been a drawback in the pleasure that Mrs. St. Pierre had ex-

perienced in making to Caroline the proposal from Lord Rockforest, that she would thereby be preventing all hopes of a union between her and Sir Vaughan. She resolved, therefore, to try what sort of feelings were entertained by Caroline towards the Welsh baronet.

"Certainly, my dear Caroline, if you feel that Lord Rockforest is so displeasing to you that you could not be happy with him, it would be a sad thing for you to marry him. Pity that he has not the shining qualities and personal advantages of Sir Vaughan."

Caroline was silent, and said nothing. Mrs. St. Pierre continued :

"But, to be sure, one must not expect every day to meet with men like Sir Vaughan. He has character, talents, birth, and a fortune, though not large, yet independent. The woman that Sir Vaughan chooses for his wife will be a happy one indeed."

"Perhaps Sir Vaughan may never marry at all," said Caroline, with great composure of manner, as if she cared not a straw whether he did or did not.

"There is not a man in England more certain to marry," said Mrs. St. Pierre, "once that his heart is fairly engaged."

"He is not well fitted for playing the lover's part," said Caroline; "his countenance is too stern, and his manners are too reserved."

"Nay, you know but little of him, Caroline; when you are better acquainted with him you will see that Sir Vaughan is far from being stern or unduly reserved. He is certainly very handsome; is he not?"

"I cannot say that I think so. He is too bold-looking. He scrutinises one's countenance as if he desired to read your secret thoughts. There is undoubtedly a look of mental power about him, but his face is neither captivating nor beautiful."

"And how few men have faces that can be called so! Well, I like Sir Vaughan very much, and would desire to make every one else like him too; but, my dear Caroline, enough of this. I feel that Mr. St. Pierre must be acquainted with the fact of Lord Rockforest desiring to pay you his addresses, and we must go to his room."

CHAPTER IV.

DRAWING Caroline's arm within her own, Mrs. St. Pierre sailed along the spacious corridor of Belvyddyr, and traversed the long gallery that conducted to that part of the mansion where Mr. St. Pierre's private apartments were. She soon explained to her husband the reasons of her visit in company with Caroline. He immediately desired that Louisa should be sent for also. On the latter making her appearance, and on her being told that Lord Rockforest had expressed a desire to be allowed to pay his addresses to Caroline, she showed much surprise, but immediately took Caroline's part on hearing that she had decided even so peremptorily in refusing to

accept his addresses, and added some unfavourable comments of her own upon Lord Rockforest.

"And now, my dears," said Mr. St. Pierre, "you are already aware that I have proposed that you should be independent in the world, and that you should each have a fortune of ten thousand pounds. I only claim the liberty of myself and Mrs. St. Pierre approving of your choice of partners for life; but we by no means seek to compel you to marry any one that either of you would dislike or disapprove. That would be a stretch of power and influence far beyond our legitimate authority, or even our personal desires. At the same time I hope, my dearest girls, as I trust you will permit me to call you both, I fervently hope that you will carefully shun anything like capriciousness or whimsicality, but always act according to the excellent sense that has been bestowed upon you by Nature, and that you will make a careful examination of your hearts, before you permanently decide on rejecting any one who may lay claim to your hands. I cannot pretend to blame you, Caroline, for your rapid reject-

tion of this nobleman; but I confess that there is a gentleman now in this house that I should be glad to see you married to, and I violate no delicate feeling, I hope, when I say that I feel convinced that the person to whom I allude would be very glad indeed, Caroline, to make you his wife, if you willingly consented. I allude to Sir Vaughan Gwynne; but I was sorry, my dear Caroline, when I asked Sir Vaughan yesterday afternoon how he sped in your graces, to learn that your treatment of him was so—I know not how to describe it—so forbidding, perhaps, is the best word that I can apply to it.”

Caroline blushed as Mr. St. Pierre thus revealed that Sir Vaughan Gwynne had been speaking of her to a third party. Mrs. St. Pierre noticed the blush, and said,

“Dearest Cary, you will recollect that Sir Vaughan was left a ward of Mr. St. Pierre’s, and that all the Llangaer affairs for the last twenty years have been more or less subject to his supervision; so you must not be surprised at any confidential communication passing between Mr. St. Pierre and Sir Vaughan.”

"I do not like, I confess," said Caroline, "to be made the subject of such a conversation by Sir Vaughan Gwynne. He never addressed himself to me, or made any proposals of the kind referred to."

"Nay, nay, dear Caroline," said Mrs. St. Pierre; "recollect that there are more than one or two modes of addressing a young lady. I have seen Sir Vaughan very often address himself, and endeavour to pay you sundry little attentions, but nothing could well be more mortifying or coldly repellent than your manner. It has often grieved me."

Caroline felt conscience-smitten that her treatment of Sir Vaughan had been of the kind described only too faithfully by Mrs. St. Pierre. She felt that she had acted capriciously, and her conscience told her that her conduct had been somewhat wilful in the deportment that she had assumed towards Sir Vaughan Gwynne; yet she would not admit to Mrs. St. Pierre anything of the kind, or make any sort of acknowledgment to that effect.

Mr. St. Pierre took the occasion of lauding Sir Vaughan to the skies, and say-

ing that his like for virtue and high personal qualities was not to be found in all the Principality. He again protested that he did not wish in any way to bias the views of either of the Mildmaye girls towards any particular person in matrimony. In this he was followed at some length by Mrs. St. Pierre, who contrived, however, with a good deal of feminine eloquence, to insinuate a hope that the marriages of the two girls would be brought about without any constraint on their parts, but at the same time with the approval of herself and her husband.

Caroline Mildmaye knew only half of her heart and of its state at the time we have been speaking of. On the very afternoon of the conversation just recorded, she performed an act that plainly revealed the state of her affections. She hastened to inform her cousin Eustace herself of the proposal that had been made to her, and which had been refused.

Eustace was greatly excited by the intelligence. The time had now come for his taking his departure, and yet he longed to linger for some days in the beautiful

scenery of Belvyddyr, enjoying its glorious views, and gratifying his affection in the society of the cousin whom he loved. The intelligence that she had been sought in matrimony aroused him from a day-dream in which he had been indulging, and he felt that his cup of ideal happiness was about to be dashed from his lips.

Caroline and he just before dinner were strolling together not far from the house. Apparently they were only admiring the grand sea view, and the slanting rays of the sun upon the yellow tops of the Welsh mountains. But their conversation was upon a point of high consequence to them both. Caroline, without well knowing how, had half committed herself to Eustace. She had almost overcome her reluctance to marrying a man of such slender means and narrow resources. The person, manner, and the disposition of Eustace were endeared to her heart as well as her fancy. She could not disguise it from herself, that she really loved him; and yet her worldliness of disposition, her love for rank and station, as well as her own lurking vanity, that told her how she might obtain

a great prize in the matrimonial lottery, ever and anon made her uncomfortably alive to the fact that in marrying Eustace she would be, in point of fact, completely throwing herself away. Yet it was certain that she loved Eustace very much.

In this state of things she had recourse to the weak resource of compromising with herself and with her lover. She endeavoured to persuade Eustace to put off the idea of their union for some time, say for a year, until he might have better means, and until she could use her influence at Belyddyr to smooth over the difficulties that she anticipated would come from Mr. and Mrs. St. Pierre. But Eustace protested against such a course, declared that he should be quite wretched in the mean while, and, after what Caroline had told him of the apparent candour with which Mr. St. Pierre had declared to her and to Louisa, that neither he nor Mrs. St. Pierre would endeavour to bias their views unfairly in matrimony, he thought that it would be better for him at once to make an open statement to Mr. St. Pierre of the real nature of the case, and endeavour, if

possible, to gain his approbation of the match.

But to such a proposal Caroline was most averse. She knew the pride, and feelings of rank and consequence, which animated Mr. and Mrs. St. Pierre, and she felt certain that neither of them would ever consent to favour the views of Eustace Mildmaye upon her hand. Accordingly, a long and unsatisfactory parley took place between them, which was broken up with the understanding that Caroline on that evening would declare all her feelings to her sister Louisa, and profit by her counsels on the occasion.

They had thus arranged matters, and were returning to the house together. Passing a small workhouse, in which the few poor on the neighbouring estates were domiciled, they saw a man's figure suddenly come out of the porter's lodge. A slight screen of timber for a few moments interposed between them, but in a moment the man advanced on his path, and came directly towards them.

Eustace stopped for a moment, as if he was suddenly ill. Caroline looked at him. Her cousin's face was pallid.

"No! no! I am not ill. 'Tis nothing. Come on—we shall be late for dinner."

She turned round, and in a few feet of her, with his pale face and base low brow, was the stranger, whom she had so often seen at Dryford. There he was, standing quietly to let them both pass, as he looked at them with a fierce, fixed gaze. It was the person whom her sister Louisa had called "The Wandering Jew." Caroline almost trembled as she passed him, but he said or did nothing. She thought that he meant mischief to Eustace, but the latter walked on quickly, and not a word was said on either side.

When they had got out of the hearing of the stranger, Caroline nervously expressed her apprehension of him, and said that she was sure that Eustace knew something evil about him, and she was giving utterance to her curiosity, when Eustace, with considerable peevishness of tone, told her not to tease him so.

"Perhaps it is the same man that you may have seen at Dryford. Well, what then? Why should you be asking questions about such a person? Surely you

must know that clergymen have intercourse with the worst members of the community. Do not you recollect that I had for two years to perform clerical duty at the gaol of H——? Why should you be so inquisitive?"

"But really," said Caroline, "I almost fancy that——"

"Ah! Mrs. St. Pierre, there you are!" said Eustace, advancing quickly to meet Mrs. St. Pierre, who was just returning from the village, and had come upon them suddenly from a shrubbery. The parties joined, and the conversation was interrupted.

Louisa was in the drawing-room, already dressed for dinner. Caroline hastened to her room. It was rather awkward for her on that evening to meet Lord Rockforest, but the unpleasantness soon vanished, as he did not sit near her at the dinner-table, nor approach her during the whole evening; nor could any one in the company have supposed that the noble lord had been rejected as a suitor by any of the ladies in the room.

It so happened, in the course of the

night, that the conversation turned upon secrets, and the difficulty of keeping them, a subject which was introduced out of a talk about *Junius's* Letters.

"The most extraordinary thing about *Junius*," said Sir Vaughan Gwynne, "is his having been able to maintain the secret, when one would suppose he had given so many marks by his knowledge of particular facts that he could be discovered."

"That proves," said Harry Wilmot, "it must have been Francis, because, being only a clerk in the War Office, and his literary talents being unknown, he would not have been suspected at the time."

"Pooh! the same thing holds true of Macaulay Boyd, or Lachlan Maclean, or George Grenville's private secretary, Lloyd," said Sir Vaughan.

"How I should like to have been a *Junius*," said Fanny Bunbury, "to have been causing such a sensation, and no one to know who was astonishing the world."

"It would be too cruel and cowardly," cried Louisa Mildmaye; "I should abhor the man *Junius* if I had known him."

Wilmot gave Louisa as she said this a look of admiration that pleased her.

" 'Tis astonishing that he did not reveal who he was," cried Eustace Mildmaye; "he could have had little of an author's vanity, when he denied himself the gratification of wearing the literary laurels he gained."

"I don't think it at all astonishing," said Lord Rockforest; "he had, doubtless, a keen apprehension of the consequences that might ensue to himself. For my part, if a man were to assail my fair fame, and make me the theme of the tongue of scandal throughout the kingdom, in the way that *Junius* treated the Duke of Grafton, I am pretty sure that I should——"

"What! my lord," cried Mrs. St. Pierre, "surely you would not assassinate him, and be guilty of murder?"

Lord Rockforest's face wore for the instant an expression of savage malevolence and almost fury. Caroline Mildmaye shuddered as she gazed on him, and her sister Louisa looked with intense interest in the peer's lurid and most sinister features. But Caroline was more struck with

the air of something very like absolute terror that sat upon the face of Eustace Mildmaye, who, with ghastly countenance, listened to Lord Rockforest, as he replied to Mrs. St. Pierre's inquiries.

"I assure you, Mr. Mildmaye, that I recollect that you are a clergyman, and I wish to say nothing that a clergyman should wish not to be said, as I respect the cloth; but, as a mere mortal man, I know that if some of the secrets that *Junius* revealed about people whom he injured, were to be published about me, I could not possibly master my emotions with the apathy and impassiveness of the Duke of Grafton. I have the greatest possible hatred to any one guilty of turning informer, and revealing a secret."

"Oh, no doubt," said Mrs. Ludlow, "it is a terrible thing to reveal a great secret. I hope that I shall never have any secrets in my possession."

"Oh, then I should like to have secrets," said Fanny Bunbury. "Now the person I most envy in the present company is the Reverend Mr. Mildmaye, for I am certain that he has got some good secrets in his

possession,—have you not, Mr. Mildmaye? Now, ladies, does he not look exactly as if he had?"

This was said in Fanny Bunbury's recklessly flippant manner; with her vivacity of tone, and her undue portion of assurance. It was a speech that made Eustace Mildmaye feel very uncomfortable—almost wretched. He looked abashed, confused, and most awkward. The eyes of the company were directed towards him, and his handsome face and fine personal appearance did not save him from a sheepish and most unprepossessing air.

Ah! then it was that Caroline Mildmaye felt that she loved Eustace. Then, even when he appeared to such disadvantage before those assembled in the room, did her woman's soul experience for him tender sympathy. The palpitation of her heart, as she gazed on the young clergyman's awkward looks as Fanny Bunbury charged him with having secrets, revealed to her how much and deeply she was interested in her cousin.

"Well, really, Miss Bunbury," said Mrs. St. Pierre, laughing, "you have fired

a chance shot that seems to have gone home to the mark. For, 'pon my word, cousin Eustace, you do look as if you had some great secret."

With an awkwardly assumed tone of ease, and with some rather clumsy badinage, he tried to laugh off the charge as a mere piece of raillery; but his manner in doing so was clumsy, and to any cool observer was only confirmatory of the charge so flippantly preferred against him by Fanny Bunbury.

"Well, Mr. Wilmot," observed Mrs. St. Pierre, "I hope that *your* lady-confidant will not bring you into any serious dilemmas."

"Mr. Wilmot and a lady-confidant!" cried Fanny Bunbury, jumping off her chair. "Oh! dear me, how very curious! Pray, Mr. Wilmot, tell us all about it?"

Louisa Mildmaye just then felt great anxiety to know what lady-confidant was intimate with Mr. Wilmot.

"Ah! Miss Bunbury," said Wilmot, "there's no mystery in the case: it was only an old woman at the workhouse, who said that she had something very wonder-

ful to say, and that she would tell it only to me; but when I went to her by appointment, old Mrs. Jenny Barnes had changed her mind, and said that she would not inform against anybody."

"And was there any crime in the case?" asked Caroline Mildmaye.

"Oh, poor Barnes is half-witted, and nearly wholly bedridden," said Wilmot; "nobody minds what she says."

"Poor creature! she's to be pitied," said Mrs. St. Pierre. "She came——" But while she was speaking she was called out of the room to Mr. St. Pierre; and after some idle raillery the conversation turned off, without any further comments on Eustace Mildmaye's suspected secrets, until the Mildmaye girls found themselves in their sitting-room before going to bed.

CHAPTER V.

"'PON my word, Cary," said Louisa, "the more I think of it, the more certain I am that cousin Eustace has some great secret. How strange his manner is at times! Did you observe to-night how confused he was, and how he changed his colour when he was charged with having a secret?"

"Well, really, my dear sister," answered Caroline, "one would think that there was something very mysterious on the mind of Eustace; but in spite of his pleasing qualities, we must recollect that he has the awkwardness of a scholar, and a country divine. Like other clergymen, he may be possibly possessed of some secret. Pro-

bably he knows, or fancies that he knows, some undiscovered culprit, who has committed a great crime, and he may be embarrassed at the way in which his secret has come to him. I see nothing very terrible in that."

Then Caroline told Louisa of her having again seen the person called "The Wandering Jew" at Dryford, and that Eustace had spoken rather testily to her upon the subject. Louisa was much interested when she heard that this strange-looking person had been seen also in their present neighbourhood; but Caroline, after some discussion, advised that they should not take further notice of it, as Eustace might be much displeased, and it would seem as if they distrusted him; "And he may have some knowledge, the possession of which is embarrassing to him. I see nothing extraordinary in that."

"Well, it is very strange," answered Louisa; "but have you observed how he stares at Lord Rockforest?"

"Yes, I confess that I have observed something of what you say."

"Well," continued Louisa, "and is not

there something singular in all that, especially when we know that he has been attending Lady Rockforest, about whom so many dark stories have been told?"

"No! I see nothing so very strange in it. After all, you must allow that Lord Rockforest is sufficiently remarkable to justify some staring at him. His countenance has something peculiar in it: its boldness and hard, native audacity rivet the gaze; and he, like his mother, has a reputation that is sufficiently calculated to direct some special notice towards him."

"He is certainly very forbidding in his aspect. There is," said Louisa, "something to me that is even fearful in his face. Perhaps, dear Cary, I ought not to venture on saying that, as you might still be Lady Rockforest."

"Not the least chance of that," cried Caroline. "By the way, I do not wish the fact to transpire that Lord Rockforest has offered to pay me his addresses, and that I have peremptorily refused him."

"So that after all you wish for second thoughts," cried Louisa, in surprise, "and may give him future hope."

“Oh ! my girl, you entirely mistake,” said Caroline. “In any case, I do not think that I could be tempted to marry Lord Rockforest. But it would be deeply criminal in me now to accept his hand, when I love another.”

Louisa was startled at this declaration. Whom did her sister Caroline love ? Was it Sir Vaughan Gwynne ? The baronet was liked by Louisa, who would have been happy to have become Lady Gwynne. Was it Harry Wilmot ? Louisa admired his appearance, but he had not that style of manner, nor apparently that energy of character, which to a person of her disposition were required to make a man appear fascinating in her eyes. Yet, somehow or other, when her sister Caroline confessed to her that she loved some one already, Louisa would certainly have been sorry to hear her pronounce the name of Wilmot as being that person. Louisa had more worldly ambition than Caroline, and would have been reluctant to make a poor match, unless, indeed, her feelings were considerably roused, and her affections deeply engaged.

"And will you tell me, dearest, who is the man you love?"

"It is cousin Eustace."

"Cousin Eustace!" said Louisa, with much surprise of manner.

"Even so. What is there in it that astonishes you so much?"

"I—I—well, frankly—I am astonished, dearest sister," said Louisa.

"So you seem to be, indeed. It requires no conjurer to read your countenance at this moment. You must think that I have done something very shocking in falling in love with Eustace. I will tell you all about it in a few words. He has for a long time paid me attentions, and wished me to be his wife. It is only latterly that I find the state of my feelings to be such that I would not wish to marry any one but him. I tried at first to dissuade him, and gave him a cold reception, but I am fairly caught, and Eustace Mildmaye, one time or other, and no one else, shall be my husband."

"Well," said Louisa, "dearest Caroline, have you thought of the difficulty of maintaining a position upon his narrow means?"

I am sure that the fortune promised by Mr. St. Pierre would never be given for a match with cousin Eustace."

"I have thought of all that, and it is there the difficulty lies. That is the very reason that I speak with you upon the subject. I am so puzzled to know what to do about informing Mrs. St. Pierre. Eustace at first wished to tell her; but I almost dread doing so, lest it should displease her, and set herself and husband against us both, and then I might be the means of doing much injury to you."

"Nay, nay!" cried Louisa; "take no thought on me: 'tis rather of injuring yourself you ought to think. For really, to marry her poor cousin is but a mean *finale* for such a girl as Caroline Mildmaye, especially after the new prospects opening from Belvyddyr Hall——"

"Ah! but my dear sagacious, worldly-minded counsellor, I am in love, and you are not, and there is just the difference between us both. Here is my dilemma. Mrs. St. Pierre evidently expects to make what she calls brilliant matches for us both. It is very kind in her, doubtless,

and would be still kinder, but for her passion for matchmaking. I feel that it would be dishonourable, when I have been treated with so much kindness, not to reveal to her the true state of the case; and yet, by doing so, we bring matters at once to a crash—a thing that I recoil from.”

“Well, certainly,” said Louisa; “what you say is not without considerable importance to us both, for I confess that I should not like to have a serious difference with such kind friends as Mr. and Mrs. St. Pierre. They have been very good to us, and we have such few friends in the world. Our unfortunate family differences have done us so much damage.”

After some further conversation, the sisters parted for the night, each going to her special chamber off the green-room. Caroline felt somewhat anxious, and Louisa's feelings were of a very mixed kind. She had seen that Sir Vaughan Gwynne admired Caroline, and she herself had felt a strong admiration for the character of Sir Vaughan. She fancied that Caroline's being engaged to another might

possibly turn the attention of Sir Vaughan towards herself. Yet these and similar feelings she hardly acknowledged to herself. They rather floated through her mind than had any definite shape there. Yet, somehow or other, she was glad to believe that all rivalry between her and Caroline for the hand of Sir Vaughan was entirely at an end. Louisa Mildmaye was more ambitious than her sister, as has already been observed. She had less romantic sensibility, and more worldly aspirations, and she would not have been likely, as her sister, to fall in love with one who had so humble a position in life as her cousin Eustace.

CHAPTER VI.

ON the next day, however, matters were brought to a crisis unexpectedly. Mrs. St. Pierre had called upon Eustace to accompany her to one of her schools, and had spent the morning in a due course of lecturing, inquiring, and catechising. They were both slowly walking home from the school, when, in a paroxysm of eagerness, Eustace took advantage of the conversation being turned upon the subject of his cousins, and, addressing Mrs. St. Pierre, said,

“ Ah ! Mrs. St. Pierre, if you are thus pleased with Caroline and Louisa, you can the more easily understand what my feelings are. I have known them both so

long a time, and have seen their characters so thoroughly, no wonder that I should feel the sentiment of love."

"Oh! we all love them both," said Mrs. St. Pierre; "it is impossible to know them without loving them. They have so many powerful attractions, all the advantages of personal appearance, great talents, and considerable accomplishments: which of them is your favourite?"

"Oh, Caroline, decidedly. She has always been so."

"Well, she is my favourite of the two also, but I tell you this in confidence. I hesitated for a long time, but of the two I am inclined most to Caroline. But Louisa is very charming."

"Ah! she is nothing to Caroline. There is a sweetness and angelic softness about Caroline, an interesting and most engaging manner, and a sympathetic, mildly enthusiastic vein of character, not to be found in Louisa. Oh, Caroline is decidedly the most charming. But I am prejudiced in her favour. Even before her father's death my feelings towards her were much what

they are now, only that I did not feel so deeply, so anxiously interested about her."

Mrs. St. Pierre observed the young clergyman with an air of great curiosity. She said nothing. A thought flashed across her mind that he was in love with his cousin, but she dismissed it as absurd. He, a young clergyman, without fortune, would not have the presumption to fall in love with one who had now such high friends in the owners of Belvyddyr Hall; and even if he were silly enough to do so, Caroline would not be the fool to encourage his presumption. Of course not!

Whether Eustace guessed what was passing through Mrs. St. Pierre's mind or not, we cannot say, but he was seized with an uncontrollable impulse, and determined to rush out at once with what was uppermost in his mind.

"Ah! Mrs. St. Pierre, I trust that I will find in you one who can enter into my feelings——"

Mrs. St. Pierre, at these words, looked towards the young clergyman with increased eagerness. He continued:

"Unless Caroline Mildmaye be my wife, I shall indeed be a most unhappy man."

The stage never exhibited in a consummate actor so decided and so perfectly natural a start as Mrs. St. Pierre gave at this declaration. There was much amazement, something of incredulity, and, if the truth must be told, something also of anger in that countenance.

"Oh ! you cannot be serious. Surely, Eustace—I mean Mr. Mildmaye—you do not tell me that you are in love with your cousin."

"It is even so ; and unless we be married, we shall, I fear, be both very unhappy."

"What !" cried Mrs. St. Pierre, with an indignant expression on her countenance, "is it really possible that you have proposed to her, and that she has accepted you ?"

Eustace Mildmaye was completely staggered by the tone and looks of Mrs. St. Pierre. At first he could not answer her. She repeated the question again.

"I frankly acknowledge," said the young clergyman, "that I have paid my

addresses to Caroline, and that they have not been rejected ; and I do not see what offence or fault against any one I have committed in so doing."

"Mighty well, upon my word, Mr. Mildmaye. I think that you might as well have consulted Mr. St. Pierre or myself in the matter. In our families, those unions which might be a source of friendship, invariably, almost, with us turn out a means of discord : and it all comes of marrying cousins. As if there was not enough of that sort of thing in our circle, you must needs add to it. But the marriage has not taken place yet, and, if I have any influence in the matter, it shall never take place. For the present, good morning, Mr. Mildmaye."

Eustace was in his turn very much surprised when he saw Mrs. St. Pierre turn round to a small gravel path that led by another way to the house ; and when he found that his company was "cut" by Mrs. St. Pierre with every symptom of anger, he repented his precipitation in telling her so soon and with so little ceremony about his matrimonial designs.

In half an hour afterwards the Mildmaye sisters were summoned by Dolly Rees to Mrs. St. Pierre's private apartments. There was a grave and peculiar expression in the face of the woman Rees, such as neither of the girls had ever remarked before, and which they could not help observing. It was, in some respects, a preparation for what they saw upon entering Mrs. St. Pierre's private room.

When very good people, accustomed to religious meditation, and to regulated modes of life, give way to passion and mental disturbance, while the fit is upon them its action is more intense and violent than intemperate excitement amongst the common-place and ordinary walkers in the mere conventional path of morality. I have seen persons called "saints"—and almost worthy of the name by their virtues and genuine spirit of religion—I have seen "saints" contorted with human passion, and fiercely vehement on the one weak point in their nature, whatever that might be, being touched. As if a moral nerve in their soul was stung into torture, they have chafed and fumed, forgetful that the

very contrast of their usual life and habitual profession was casting into high relief the present aberration from their calm serenity of soul. Perhaps a really religious and genuinely good person, writhing with anger and bursting into a momentary fit of human passion, is as humiliating and painful a sight as well could be seen.

And Mrs. St. Pierre, feminine and amiable, virtuous and pious, was, nevertheless, at the time of the Mildmayes entering her room, in a state of painful excitement. Her face at once told the fact to the sisters. It was deadly pale, and the cheeks appeared to have shrunk for the moment, in the pressure put upon her nervous system. She did not raise her eyes as they entered the room, but continued to look at the desk before her.

Caroline guessed at once that she was in a passion, and that she must have heard about Eustace's proposal for her; yet she could scarcely have anticipated that Mrs. St. Pierre would have been so much annoyed. Inexperienced in the world, and too apt to read other characters by her

own, Caroline Mildmaye made no allowance for the very peculiar development to be found in her relation Mrs. St. Pierre's disposition. Mrs. St. Pierre was emphatically a patroness; and your Lady Bountiful species, though apt to preach up self-reliance to cottagers and their train of dependants, do not at all like their clients exercising that moral quality with so much spirit as to revolt from the loyal homage due to a benevolent patroness, who would like to be the creator of their happiness. Attach yourself to a patroness and her whims will exact almost as much duty and obedience from you as her virtues. Mrs. St. Pierre's leading whim was patronising, ordering, directing, and ruling the lives and interests of a large number of people in various classes, who were more or less her dependants. She felt her office to be a most elevated one, and when her clients took it into their heads to be happy after a fashion of their own, without asking her leave or counsel, she always felt more or less mortified, but it was seldom that she had her severe trials in that way.

After a little while, in a voice tremulous with excitement, she said,

"Both Mr. St. Pierre and myself have thought that we were each showing every consideration and kindness in our power towards Caroline and Louisa Mildmayer. We thought, foolishly perhaps, that we had gained their affection and regard, and we believed, perhaps too presumptuously, that we were not undeserving of confidence being placed in us. We were also anxious to obliterate every trace of the long-interrupted friendship of former years, and of the feelings thereby engendered. Mr. St. Pierre had hoped, by means of providing fortunes for you both, to have enabled you to move in the world as your father's daughters ought to do, and now I learn, with the deepest mortification, that you, Caroline, doubtless with the concurrence and sympathy of Louisa, have entered into a matrimonial engagement with your cousin Eustace Mildmayer, a young clergyman, without the means of raising you in society, or maintaining you in the comforts of your station."

"I am sorry, Mrs. St. Pierre," said

Caroline, "that you are displeased with my conduct."

"Displeased at it for your own sake,—as much, nay, far more than for Mr. St. Pierre's or my own. My husband and myself, without a family of our own, did indeed look forward with interest to the pleasure of regarding you both as our adopted children, and we thought that the connexion between us all would have been of mutual advantage. But you have decided the point, Caroline, without even consulting us ; you have chosen a partner for life. Possibly Louisa will be inclined to follow your rash example."

Louisa blushed to the temples, and her tongue, more hasty than Caroline's, would probably have uttered something that she might afterwards have regretted, but that Caroline interposed :

"Oh ! Mrs. St. Pierre, you may blame *me* as much as you please. I will submit as I best can to your censure, but let Louisa escape from your condemnation. All that you could say on the subject, Mrs. St. Pierre, she has anticipated. She has endeavoured to dissuade me from the idea,

and my dearest sister at least is in nowise to blame."

In saying so, Caroline burst into tears. Despite of her struggling efforts to maintain her self-possession, her emotions were too much for her. She felt sore at the tone of censure and of superiority assumed by Mrs. St. Pierre; her feelings of personal pride were nettled; her being called in question upon her conduct was new to her, and at the same time she felt the difficulty of her situation, and the great importance of not parting upon bad terms with one like Mrs. St. Pierre, who had really been kind to her and Louisa.

Nor were her tears without immediate effect. They were rapid peacemakers, and pleaded her cause more powerfully than words. No longer was Mrs. St. Pierre's sense of power offended. She saw Caroline mortified, pained, and humbled, and the kindness of her nature could not resist the sight of any one in distress.

"Nay," she cried, "dearest child, I spoke to you only for your good. Come, dry those tears. The matter is too serious to be decided by excited feelings, and I

will not oppose your marriage with your cousin, if on reflection and on examination you find that——”

“I cannot marry any one else,” sobbed out Caroline.

“Ah ! dearest, that is often said by girls, whose acts afterwards contradict their words. Girls, often, are not the best judges of their own hearts. Come, we will talk this matter over in the evening, or in the morning. Meantime, believe me, dearest Cary, that I will always, in all cases, be your steadfast friend. I love you—and you, too, dear Louisa—I love you both as my children.” And she kissed them affectionately.

The sisters prepared to retire, and Cary said that she could not appear at dinner; and it was arranged that a headache, or some other vague “indisposition,” would be pleaded for her absence from the dining-room.

On opening the door of Mrs. St. Pierre’s room, and in going out upon the large lobby, they saw a servant-woman with a duster in her hand, flapping one of the walls. Both girls stopped at the sight, for

they instinctively feared that their conversation might have been overheard. The door behind them was still open, and Mrs. St. Pierre's quick eye saw that they hesitated. She immediately came forward, and saw the woman with her back to them all, apparently quite unconcerned, engaged in the act of dusting one of the walls of the lobby with a brush and a rubber.

"Ho! what servant is this here, at this time of the day? Ah! I see, this is the new servant-woman. What is your name, I forget?"

"Mary Crowder, ma'am, and please your ladyship," said the woman.

"It doesn't please my ladyship, as you phrase it, to see you at this time of the day here. What are you here for at this hour?"

The woman so addressed was rather under the middle size. She was strong and sturdy in make, though not large of limbs; her years were about forty, and she might have been on a cursory glance pronounced comely and good-looking. But her grey eyes had a hard, cruel, cowardly

look, like an animal that would tear a weak victim, but sneak away from a strong opponent. On being interrogated as to her business, she answered very quietly, and with all appearance of perfect truth,

"I ask your ladyship's pardon—ma'am—I'm sure, but in the morning I was called away before I had dusted this here wall, and I had only just returned now to clean it."

"You ought to know better, Crowder, than to come here at this time of the day with cleaning instruments. Who sent you here? It was not the housekeeper, surely?"

"No, ma'am—your la'ship, I mean. I came of my own pure accord."

"You should have asked for orders from the housekeeper. You cannot have lived in good service, I'm afraid, or you would not be seen at this hour, tramping about a house doing morning work."

The woman looked rather sulky. The Mildmays girls walked onwards to their room, Caroline hastening her steps, lest some one should observe the signs of her emotion upon her face.

"Come in here, Crowder," said Mrs. St. Pierre, as she returned to her private cabinet.

The servant followed, and there was something like a scowl on her face as she followed her mistress.

"Now, Crowder, just tell me the families you lived with, for I fear you must be very ignorant of your duties."

"Please your la'ship—ma'am—I lived for a year with Lady Torrencourt, at Bloxham Park; and with Sir Charles Jeffcott, at Maldon Hall; and until the Countess of Newtown died I lived with her ladyship; and besides them, your la'ship——"

"Don't call me your ladyship, I am Mrs. St. Pierre, and you know, or ought to know, as well as I do, that it is with Mrs. St. Pierre you hired; and after residing with so many families, it is proof of very discreditable ignorance on your part, Crowder, not to know how to give a lady her proper address."

"I beg pardon, your lady——"

"Again at it!"

"I ask a thousand pardons, ma'am,—"

but I am so much in the habit, your ladyship,—Oh, ma'am, excuse me, I beg of you,—I'm but a poor simple under-servant,—I'm so sorry to give offence to your lady—I mean, ma'am—I hope you'll forgive me; and indeed I'll try and do everything I possibly can to please your ladyship."

"You will please me now by leaving me, and minding your business better in future," said Mrs. St. Pierre.

The door closed upon the retiring servant, and Mrs. St. Pierre exclaimed to herself,

"Humph! I hardly know what to think of this woman Crowder. I don't think that she could have been listening, and it is very evident that she is a stupid creature, who has not profited much from the high families in which she has lived. I doubt whether I shall keep her at all. But perhaps she may do as an errand-servant. Both Mary Walters and Dolly Rees, when I send them into the village, are too much given to gossiping with their relatives and old companions; and this Crowder, being a stranger in this

country, would quickly do her messages without unnecessary talk. I think that I was right not to tax her with being a listener to my conversation with Caroline and Louisa. I might have been only suggesting to her the very thing that she ought not to do. No! I really do not think that she can have been listening."

With her practised experience in life and great energy of character, Mrs. St. Pierre was not long in deciding what should be done about Caroline's engagement with Eustace Mildmaye. She contrived by entreaty and expostulation, and by skilful management, to gain time upon the two lovers; and Caroline consented, half willingly, to defer the irrevocable decision on the point for another twelve-month. It was stipulated, however, that she may have free correspondence with Eustace; and Caroline was further soothed by the intimation that she would be for a couple of months in London during the next season, and would have fresh opportunity of meeting him.

Her sister Louisa was rather surprised at Caroline's temporising at all in the

matter, and said to herself that *she* never would act so in case her affections were engaged. "Perhaps Caroline, after all, is not much in love with him."

But Caroline was really in love with Eustace, and had sworn to her own heart that she never should marry any one else but him. She had consented to put their union off, and to consent to a compromise, because she did not wish to injure Louisa's position at Belvyddyr. If in this she was somewhat artful, it was at least an artifice of the heart that she was guilty of, and besides, she hoped that she might yet coax the full consent of Mrs. St. Pierre to the union.

Upon the arrangement having been come to, Eustace Mildmaye left Belvyddyr in perfect good-humour with its master and mistress, and feeling perfectly assured that Caroline would be his, perhaps even before the time named.

CHAPTER VII.

SCARCELY, however, had Eustace Mildmaye left Belvyddyr than Sir Vaughan took up his residence there, on a prolonged visit, losing sight for the time of his improvements at Llangaer Castle. It soon became evident to Louisa that the baronet was deeply and decidedly in love with her sister Caroline, and her own feelings towards Sir Vaughan could not help experiencing a decided change, when she found that her sister was so much the object of his admiration. Still, however, she saw much in Sir Vaughan to interest and attract her.

Perhaps if Louisa had known, at the time, the place that she herself held in the heart of Harry Wilmot, she might not

have wasted a thought upon any one else. Wilmot loved Louisa enthusiastically, and not even the chilling manner that she had at first adopted towards him, when he made her his advances, could extinguish the seeds of love in his mind. During his occasional visits at Belvyddyr, when he was able to get a holiday from his official occupations, Wilmot had succeeded in making more advances to a better understanding with her. He appeared no longer to wear the manner of a suitor to her hand; and Louisa's mind being free from the restraint that she had imposed upon herself of giving no false hopes to him, now that he seemed to have retired from the pursuit of her in marriage, she was enabled to adopt a more frank and easy manner with him, and, almost without her feeling it, Wilmot, with his graces and high intelligence, rose very high in her esteem.

Meanwhile, Lord Beauparc and Mr. Baskervyll had returned from Yorkshire, after their sojourn at the residence of the latter, where the noble landscape-gardener had been suggesting all possible sorts of improvements for Baskervyll Park.

"What a laugh at Lord Beauparc I shall have, girls, when I shall be Mrs. Baskervyll of Baskervyll Park!" said Fanny Bunbury, one day, as she was seated with the Mildmayes and Miss Tufton.

"Why! has Mr. Baskervyll proposed to you?" said Caroline.

"Not yet, but he's safe in my toils. I see they're both after me, both he and Lord Beauparc. The first is downright in love with me: I make such a capital listener to him when he bursts forth in one of his eruptions of pedantry; and the second is in love with my fortune, if not with myself."

"And why," said Miss Tufton, "would you not be Lady Beauparc? Is not a peeress higher than a commoner's wife?"


"Pooh! where have you lived all the days of your life?" said Fan Bunbury. "A poor lord is nothing but a mark for derision. Lord Beauparc has a wretched two thousand a year, and what is that for a man with a title? The wife of such a man would be a mere nobody in town. Oh, no! Daddy Dryasdust is the man for Fanny Bunbury."

"Hush! here they are," cried Louisa Mildmaye.

"Oh! Mr. Baskervyll," said Fanny Bunbury, "we were just talking of you. I was lecturing these young ladies on the distinction between peers and *parvenus*—between lords, commons, knights, and so forth; and I have got floundering in the history of England, and you alone can help me out. I was trying to teach them that, somehow or other, the Peerage does not rank as high now as it did formerly."

Lord Beauparc bridled as Fanny Bunbury said this. If he had been a rich lord he would not have cared for the remark. On the other hand, Mr. Baskervyll was delighted with the hint of a subject on which he could expatiate, and display his minute knowledge.

"The number of peers made by Mr. Pitt," said he, "did much—too much—to familiarise us all with the facility of making lords. From 1784 to 1830, in forty-six years, there were two dukes, twenty marquises, fifty earls, fifteen viscounts, and one hundred and thirty-eight barons, added to the Peerage."



"Dear me!" cried Fanny Bunbury, "I wonder, Mr. Baskervyll, how it is possible that you can recollect things with such minuteness."

"Oh, why not? Sure, every one," said Mr. Baskervyll, "must remember all the details about the Peerage of England. Why, it is an historical subject; the House of Lords is a Chamber of Legislation; and every constitutional politician, every loyal subject, is bound to know much about the Peerage, if he knows anything at all."

"I must say," said Caroline, "that I think the number of new peers made from time to time, must detract very forcibly from the dignity and the historical glory of the Peerage."

Mr. Baskervyll was heartily pleased to find Caroline uttering such a sentiment, for it gave him fresh opportunity of showing off his memory, and his hoarded pile of statistics. The Peerage, and everything relating to it, was just one of those topics on which he loved to break forth, crammed with digested knowledge, obtained from poring over the books treat-

ing of the historic details relating to the nobility ; and when he spoke on these subjects, he always delivered himself with an air of such superiority in his manner, that one might have supposed that mumbling the names of the nobility imparted additional lustre to his own ancient family, and infused augmented generosity into his blood.

“Why,” said he, taking up the last remark of Caroline with an apparent snappishness of manner, resulting from his over-anxiety to display his knowledge, —“why, what would you have? Unless you have new creations, the nobility itself, by the very laws of nature, must die out. When James the First came to the throne, there were only fifty-nine lay peers, and during his reign he created not less than sixty-two.”

“That was raising the number of the peers,” said Fanny Bunbury, winking at Louisa, “nearly a hundred per cent.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Baskervyll. “Being a Scotchman, and having no secure hold on the affections of his English subjects, he thought, by ennobling eminent families,

to increase his power. In the reign of his son Charles there were but thirty peers created, owing to the troubles; but Charles, partly from gratitude for services, and partly from necessity, made not less than eighty-seven peers."

"Eighty-seven peers!" said Fanny Bunbury. "Why, like Bob Acre's courage, my respect for the order is beginning to ooze out at my fingers' ends."

"James the Second made but eight; William the Third made thirty; Anne made thirty, also; George the First made twenty-eight; George the Second made twenty-six; and George the Third made——"

"Ay! how many did old Georgy make?"

"George the Third," continued Mr. Baskervyll, with imperturbable gravity, "made two hundred and twenty-four peers——"

"Two hundred and twenty-four!" cried Miss Bunbury, with well-acted expression of amazement.

"Two hundred and twenty-four lords in one reign!" cried Miss Tufton. "I had

no idea that our peerage was so *parvenue*."

"And George the Fourth," continued Mr. Baskervyll, "made sixty-four. But there are more very curious points about this, that I wish to imprint on your attention. Of the hundred and sixty-eight peers that were in existence at the accession of George the First, there remain now on the roll but one hundred and six; of George the First's peers, fourteen only remain; of George the Second's, twenty remain; of the numerous batches made by George the Third, one hundred and forty now remain; of those by George the Fourth, forty-five."

"Well, Mr. Baskervyll," said Fanny Bunbury, while she ludicrously winked at Louise, "how you carry all this knowledge with such accuracy in your head is to me quite surprising. You are really a prodigy of memory! I have seen Theodore Hook and his powers of improvising, but really your faculty of carrying so many figures in your head seems to me even more surprising than the talent of Mr. Hook."

Mr. Baskervyll's face flushed with the pleasure of flattered pedantry. The triviality of his tiresome statistics never appeared to him in a ridiculous light, though the ladies of the party were almost suffocated with laughter in trying to prevent their amusement from being seen by the pedantic gentleman himself. In truth, the manner in which Fanny Bunbury showed him off, and the way in which she accompanied his effusion of statistics, with nods, winks, grins, and grimaces, was irresistibly comic, and most ludicrous.

"But it is well worth your notice," continued the indomitable Baskervyll, "that while the number of English peers in 1715 was but one hundred and sixty-eight, there have been since that period not less than two hundred and sixty-nine cases of extinction; the number now remaining, exclusive of the Scotch and Irish peers, and of the bishops, is but three hundred and fifty-nine."

Here Miss Bunbury gave such a comical wink, and turned up the whites of her eyes to heaven with such *plus quam* Listonian powers of the ludicrous, that Miss Tufton

was nearly half choked, and, unable to stay longer, turned down another walk with Louisa Mildmaye, at the time that Caroline was stopped by the gardener, who asked her some questions about a particular plant, with the culture of which she was specially acquainted.

Mr. Baskervyll and Fanny Bunbury found themselves on a side walk, surrounded with shrubs, and without their late companions. The pedant's head was still running on the *ana* of the peerage that his memory was plying him with.

"What a place for a proposal!" thought Fanny; "how I do wish that this tiresome old pedant would offer me his hand!"

"Yes! Miss Bunbury," said Mr. Baskervyll, "I know what you're thinking of just now."

"Indeed! I am very sorry that you do not, Mr. Baskervyll," cried the hopeful Fanny, with a pretty little toss of her head.

"Ah! but I do, though," replied the gentleman. "You are thinking of the exact ratio that the new peers bear to the old. Well, stay a moment, and I will tell

it to you to a nicety, for I have calculated it with great exactness. You see, the actual addition of one hundred and ninety-one peers to the peerage since 1715,—making allowance for all those that have become extinct,—gives, in the space of one hundred and fifteen years, a total creation of four hundred and sixty peers, being at the rate of four a year upon an average; while the extinction rate may be taken also upon an average of two and one-third *per annum*." And the pedant's little eyes flashed and gleamed with self-esteem as he spluttered forth in his thin, sharp, indistinct voice this piece of information.

"But why don't you become a peer yourself, Mr. Baskervyll?" cried Fanny. "With your talents, your fortune, your hereditary estate, your weight of character, your public reputation, you would really do honour to the noble order; unlike so many of those titled ciphers, whose very rubbishy condition encrust the 'Corinthian capital of the constitution,' as Mr. Pitt called the peerage."

"Mr. Pitt," said Mr. Baskervyll, "never said anything of the kind. You must be

thinking of Mr. Burke; and the exact phrase he used was, 'the Corinthian columns of polished society.' "

"Well, then, Mr. Burke let it be," said Fanny Bunbury. "But why are not you a peer, Mr. Baskervyll?"

"Ahem! Well, I might be if I liked; but my name is a noble one, though it is without a title. There never yet was a Baskervyll, even in the second or third degree related to the parent stock, engaged in trade or commerce of any kind. We intermarried in past times with the De Veres, and the Nevilles of the elder branch. My great-grandfather's grandsire married a Neville, and since the reign of Charles the Second we have regularly married peers' daughters, excepting my father, who broke through the spell, and married the daughter of a merchant. Folk do say that it is from her I inherit my talent for figures and power of recollecting dates."

"Well, but the peerage, Mr. Baskervyll?" said Fanny.

"Ah! yes, I'll take a peerage to please my wife. I'll give her a spick and span

new coronet for her *trousseau*, and she shall have a voice in the choice of my title."

"Happy woman!" sighed out Fanny.

"Should you like to be a peeress?" asked Mr. Baskervyll.

"Ask a curate would he like to be a bishop; ask a lawyer would he like to be a chancellor; ask a corporal would he like to be a general; and ask a girl entering life, with all the world before her, would she like to be a peeress."

The conversation continued. Fanny prattled on; Mr. Baskervyll stopped short for a moment. He looked very thoughtfully. Was he racking his brain for some statistics? No! He then looked around him, as if to try whether any person were within hearing. He took a step or two more in advance; then he stopped again—looked fixedly at Miss Bunbury—said something to her; in a minute or two there was a flush over her face. They walked on further: her head was turned down—she was speaking in a very low tone; the walk wound out of sight, but in a few minutes more they reappeared, and

Fanny's face was more flushed than before, and Mr. Baskervyll talked faster than ever, and was the most voluble of chatterboxes. Another minute, and they were at the Hall, and they walked inside.

The Mildmaye girls were in their sitting-room, discussing the question whether they might ask Mrs. St. Pierre to dispense some portion of her charity amongst some poor old people in Kent, for whom they were interested, and to whom they had been kind when they were differently circumstanced. They heard a very quick step run rapidly along the gallery—so very quickly and so lightly that it might have been a frisky little spaniel chasing a cat, and in another moment their door was suddenly thrown open, and, quite breathless, with cheeks dyed with a scarlet flush, and flashing eyes, half wild with excitement and delight, in burst upon them Fanny Bunbury.

The Mildmayes were very astonished, but infinitely more so when they saw their visitor skip round the room, and toss her gloves up to the ceiling.

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!” she cried,

and gave another skip round the room. Nor did the visitor stay to look at the cloud of displeasure gathering over Caroline Mildmay's face.

"I've done it! I've done it! I've done it!" cried Fan Bunbury, at last sinking into a chair, and seeking to recover her breath. "He's hooked, my dears, he's hooked. He's the best fool, the kindest fool, the sweetest fool in Christendom. Oh! my delightful, darling, dearest donkey of a Daddy Dryasdust! Only think of his actually proposing for me! You see, girls, what fortune I have, and how well I played my cards. Spirit, after all, is what the men like. The *penseroso* style does not go down with them, though really, if I were a man—and I'm half sorry at times that I'm not—the beauty that I should admire most is that which you, Miss Darky Ducky, possess. However, we all have our chances; and how beautifully ordained by a wiser Power than ours, girls, that the variety of tastes in the world should contribute to equalise our chances of winning the prizes of society. And have not I won a glorious prize? I never soared higher in my dreams

than to be a Mrs. Baskervyll of Baskervyll Park ; and, my dears, there is every likelihood of Mr. Baskervyll being made a peer, and I shall then be a peeress, and you will be reading in the papers of ' Lady Dryasdust' being presented to his Majesty. Oh dear ! 'tis just like a chapter in the ' Arabian Nights,' and I hope that it will not prove a dream. I almost dread lest I should wake, and find that I have been asleep. But I must go off to your dear, charming aunt, and tell her the glorious news."

And away Fanny Bunbury ran to communicate the intelligence of Mr. Baskervyll's offer. Mrs. St. Pierre was glad, and was sorry. As a matter of course, she rejoiced at the matrimonial reputation of Belvyddyr being kept up, by the offer of Mr. Baskervyll having been made under her roof, though she, also, regretted that the rich prize of a Baskervyll of Baskervyll Park had not fallen to the share of one of her cousins. But she politely dissembled her disappointment, and congratulated Miss Bunbury on her good fortune.

"I am so glad," said Mrs. St. Pierre,

“that Mr. Baskervyll came to the point with you at once, because Mr. St. Pierre and myself will be obliged to leave Belvyddyr for three months. We set out in a few days for town. Business of great consequence, and the necessity for constant surgical attendance, will compel us to a more prolonged sojourn in town than is our wont. I take for granted that the marriage will be solemnised in London; and I hope, Miss Bunbury, that we shall have the pleasure of seeing much of you before the happy knot is tied.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Mildmaye girls were very glad of the change to town. They had seen but little of society in London, and the variety of life that it opened to their eyes naturally awakened their expectations. On the morning after their arrival in town, they looked out upon the view in Portman-square with almost as pleasurable feelings, though of quite a different kind, as if it had been a scene in the Welsh mountains. At the bottom of Caroline's feelings was the consciousness that she should have some more chances of seeing her cousin Eustace; and Louisa's livelier and more vivacious nature anticipated various gratifications from the constant scene of change

that London life presented. Some friends of Mrs. St. Pierre undertook the charge of introducing them to the fashionable world ; and, what with balls, operas, and bazaars, there was no likelihood of their passing a dull time.

But in this world it is difficult to say when we are on the brink of pain or pleasure. To all appearances the position of the Mildmayes was a vast improvement upon the state in which they had found themselves but a short time previously, when they had been compelled to live in a petty cottage, after their luxurious life at Boxgrove. They felt something of the unpleasant position of dependance ; and Mrs. St. Pierre's manner was, it must be confessed, too patronising, and too full of the importance given by her wealth and position. With girls of a coarser mould, the manner of Mrs. St. Pierre would not have been a matter of any moment, nor would it have given the least annoyance. But Caroline and Louisa Mildmaye were proud, high-spirited, and sensitive, and they felt a constant struggle going on in their natures between the exigencies of

their position, and the natural tendencies of their characters. The somewhat ambiguous relation that they occupied, or, to speak more truly, that they themselves fancied they occupied, in the household of Mr. and Mrs. St. Pierre, was brought before them by all the petty variety of the circumstances of their every-day life. Mrs. St. Pierre wished them to go a great deal into society, and to have them presented at court; and she herself did not choose to be their *chaperon*, but preferred that they should be dependant on the politeness, occasionally capricious, of various dowager ladies of her acquaintance. If Lady Upington was in the sulks, owing to one of her fights with her husband, the Mildmayes attributed her conduct, in scarcely speaking to them on the night that they went with her to Almack's, to her contempt for their situation as daughters of a bankrupt. If Mrs. Monfort, the leading horsewoman of the fair equestrians at Rotten-row, seemed always anxious to avoid riding with them (though they had been specially recommended to her by Mrs. St. Pierre), the Mildmayes again at-

tributed the coldness and reserve of Mrs. Monfort to the subordinate position in society occupied by themselves. So on, in numberless other instances.

It was evident, also, to the two sisters that Mrs. St. Pierre had set her mind upon marrying them, and that she appeared to fancy that she could do as she pleased with them. It was true that she did not say so in so many words, but the fact was capable of being inferred from the tone that she took with them, from the way in which she discussed their social arrangements, speculated on their chances, talked of their future settlement, and enlarged upon the views of society which they ought to entertain. How long this state of things would have lasted it might have been impossible to say, but circumstances occurred which developed events that almost took the solution of the question out of the hands of those, who thought that it depended upon themselves alone to solve it.

One evening, about half-past six o'clock, the two sisters were riding together in Rotten-row. They were trotting towards

Kensington, and the evening sun was shining so brightly in their faces that they could not very plainly recognise the countenances of those coming against them. As yet they were so strange in London society that few of their male acquaintances were intimate enough to ride with them; and they had not, in truth, as many to salute, as other girls, of two or three seasons' standing. A cousin of Lord Beauparc's—a young barrister, very anxious to make his way into fashionable life, and who had neither the fortune nor the talent to take up a very decided position, either in Mayfair or Westminster Hall—was their escort.

In the part of the ride where they were, there were but few pedestrians on the footway. Caroline saw two or three gentlemen approaching towards them, but before they came close a couple of ladies cantered by from behind, and for the moment put out of sight the group that Caroline had noticed. The sun was shining very brightly in her eyes; and just as the gentlemen passed, she thought that one of them

made some motion with his hand, but she did not particularly notice it.

Mr. Tuffnell, the gentleman riding with them, and who took particular pleasure in pointing out several people, whose names, but not their persons, were familiar to the Mildmayes, said,

"That was Sir Vaughan Gwynne who just passed. He's a very rising man in politics. He saluted one of those ladies galloping before us. She could not have observed him, else she would not have so cavalierly cantered by."

"Oh! we know Sir Vaughan Gwynne very well," said Louisa. "I'm sorry we did not see him. Cary, did you see Sir Vaughan Gwynne pass by?"

"No, I did not," said Caroline. "Which way did he go? I hope that he will not think we cut him."

Mr. Tuffnell then discussed the character of Sir Vaughan, and said that he was reported to be proud; and, he added, that he thought he had a great deal of *hauteur* in his manner, for he had practised before him on Parliamentary Committees; and

then the young barrister sought to engage the attention of Louisa Mildmaye to the Election Petition for Gammonborough, when he, the not at all fluent and would-be fashionable Mr. Tuffnell was junior counsel to Mr. Serjeant Wrangler, and was opposed to the united abilities of Mr. Sharpley, Q.C., Mr. Smith Brown, and Mr. Jones Robinson—the latter of whom was a double first-class man at Oxford, while Smith Brown had been amongst the Senior Optimes at Cambridge; and for the next half-hour Louisa's politeness was heavily taxed with trying to listen to Bar anecdotes, and accounts of a concert at the Lord Chancellor's, which Mr. Tuffnell took especial delight in recounting, on account of the very excellent, the "really quite admirable thing" that the Lord Chancellor had said to him. "It happened just thus——" But no! Mr. Tuffnell, we will not repeat it, admirable though it was, as everything said by a Lord Chancellor has an *ex-officio* right to be. We prefer to tell what happened towards the end of the Mildmayes' ride.

They had turned, and cantered home-

wards. It was getting near seven o'clock, and Mrs. St. Pierre had told them not to remain out long that evening, as she had a few old friends that night at her house, who did not wish for late hours. Louisa proposed to ride across the bridge over the Serpentine, as taking them a shorter, and less obstructed road to Portman-square. But Caroline was half afraid lest Sir Vaughan Gwynne might have been offended with her for not having returned his salute. She knew that Mr. Tuffnell's character of him as "proud and rather haughty" was in some respects a true one; and knowing that Mrs. St. Pierre had a special regard for him, and that he had always distinguished himself with attentions meant to be flattering, she thought it best to try and see whether she might not meet with Sir Vaughan again that evening, and accordingly she proposed to her sister to return upon Rotten-row, and ride home by Park-lane, saying that they should have time enough. Louisa, who was very fond of riding, consented, and their horses' heads were turned towards Apsley House, and soon were in rapid

motion. The circumstance was but a slight one to record in a life, yet slight as it was, it exercised considerable influence on Caroline Mildmaye's final fate.

Rotten-row, in the season, is one of the finest sights in Europe, and presents also one of the most characteristic features in our English social life. That peculiar mixture of old blood, new wealth, patrician antiquity, presuming wealth and pretentious vulgarity, that form so many elements of our society, is there to be seen in all its varieties. There, at the corner near the railings, are a crowd of club dandies, Guardsmen in "mufty" clothes, and senators holding a standing committee of inquiry as to which is the best horsewoman in the Row. Up and down along the footway are walking small groups of provincials, gazing on the equestrian throng, glad to recognise some mounted acquaintance, and still more glad to be recognised in turn. The "great people" of their respective localities have shrunk into very small people; the rocks of remote country districts seem polished down into pebbles in the current of London life.

There is the young *debutante* of the season, riding near her dowager mamma; the latter now appears mounted, she says, "for her health," but in reality in chase of an eligible husband for her daughter. How raw, unripe, and unformed is the daughter! How awkward she looks while the Guardsmen scrutinise her closely! How cold, austere, and scrutinising is the glance of the mother, as she looks around the ring, into which the riding parties have formed at the top of the Row. How the charming widow, Mrs. Leigh Vernon, looks bewitching from her black mare, exulting in her beauty, her ample jointure, and her freedom from her late partner, whom her fiery temper helped to promote to a higher world! See there, surrounded with a throng of notabilities, the Scotch beauty, Lady Cairncross; while that simple-looking girl on the bay mare riding in her train is the great Welsh heiress, Miss Brytton, the daughter of the *millionnaire* ironmaster at Merthyr-Llynrhyn. And there is the belle of ten seasons, tall, thin, and thirty-three, Lady Constance Audley, bright, slender, and smiling,—a maypole

they both caused amongst the crowd of observers, who loitered round. Scarcely had Caroline succeeded in catching the eye of Sir Vaughan Gwynne, than she bowed to him with great good-humour, and as much courtesy of expression as she permitted herself to exhibit before so many lookers-on. All the eyes of the loungers were then turned towards the fortunate man, Sir Vaughan, who knew the strange beauties; and the baronet, though usually rather cold, also enjoyed the pleasure of making a sensation in his turn. Off went his hat, with more warmth of manner than I would have believed he could have exhibited to any person. In a few moments he was listening to the dulcet tones of Caroline Mildmaye's voice, while she apologised for her apparent discourtesy in not returning his previous salute.

"Make no excuses; the crowd here is so great to-day," said Sir Vaughan, "that one cannot be expected to see everybody."

"Have you been long in town?" continued Caroline.

"Not very," said Sir Vaughan, and his face beamed with pleasure at the notion

of being thus interrogated in Rotten-row by Caroline Mildmaye, whose beauty attracted the attention of all the standers-by. There was certainly some softness and increased sweetness in the manner of Caroline on this occasion; but the fact was, that she wished to remove all impression from the mind of Sir Vaughan that she had avoided returning his salute.

Sir Vaughan, also, felt considerably elated as he observed the crowd upon the footway, and several of those lounging upon horseback, eagerly turn towards the Mildmaye girls, with whom he continued to converse for a few minutes. The vanity of men is less demonstrative than that of women. Sir Vaughan was not the first young man of fashion whose spirits rose extravagantly while chatting with youthful beauty at Rotten-row, upon one of its crowded days.

After some conversation on passing things, the baronet for the second time inquired after Mrs. St. Pierre, and said that he should call on to-morrow to visit her; and on rode the Mildmaye girls home to Portman-square. Sir Vaughan, in the

mean time, after saluting them both, and seeing them ride off in the direction of Gloucester Gate, proceeded to his club—the Palladium. His walk through the Green Park was irregularly slow on that day. If an observer would have looked close, he might have seen that Sir Vaughan was rather grave in aspect, but that his eyes were lighted up with animation. He stopped, also, once or twice in his walk, and whatever he may have been thinking of, it is certain that he was very abstracted and wrapt in thought.

When he reached the club, he gave his hat mechanically to the hall-porter, who placed it on the rack. With slow steps Sir Vaughan entered the dining-room, with so grave a face that even the waiters remarked the austerity of his countenance. One of them brought him the *carte*. He took it mechanically, and pored over it again and again. Deep appeared to be his deliberation on the simple question, "What shall I have for dinner?" The waiter in attendance expected something extraordinary from so much meditation, and was amazed that nothing greater came

of it than "Julienne soup—*soles Hollandaises*—*Maintenon* cutlets—pint of Hock." Slowly and deliberately did Sir Vaughan eat his solitary dinner. Little did he heed the conversation flying about him. Deaf were his ears to the news from Doncaster—the rumours about a batch of new peers, and the raptures of Lord Twitterton about the new singer. His reputation stood high as a man of sense and gravity, and certainly his appearance supported it that evening at the Palladium Club.

And yet, all this time there was dancing before that grave-looking gentleman's fancy a certain pair of dark eyes and softly expressive countenance, with look of pensive mildness! Which of the men of the world who filled the dining-room on that day at the Palladium, would have supposed that a woman was at the bottom of the thoughtful baronet's meditations?

CHAPTER IX.

ON the next evening, Caroline and Louisa were together in the drawing-room by themselves. Mrs. St. Pierre had gone out to visit a sick friend.

"What a crowd there was in the Parks to-day!" remarked Louisa.

"I should enjoy it more," observed Caroline, "if we knew more of the people. But I suppose some of the belles of ten seasons would be glad to give us all their knowledge, if we could take a quarter from their years."

"Belles of ten seasons!" said Louisa; "you cannot suppose that there are such monsters in a civilised capital?"

Just then there was a knock at the

door, and in a few minutes the butler brought in a card.

"Cousin Eustace!" exclaimed Caroline, with some flurry of manner, as she tossed the card over to Louisa.

"Of course we are at home to him," said Louisa; "will you ask him to walk up-stairs?"

In a few moments Eustace was with the Mildmaye sisters. He slid quietly into a seat, and looking fondly towards Caroline, he said,

"I only came to town this morning, and was on my way hither in the afternoon, when I met Sir Francis Rivers, an old college friend, just returned from service in India with his regiment, and we walked into Hyde Park; and I saw you both cantering towards Gloucester Gate; but I could not get near you: and here I am."

"And will you be long in town?" said Caroline.

"Only three or four days," answered the curate. "I have to give evidence in a case about some lapsed parish charities; and I have to encounter civilians, attor-

neys, proctors, doctors of law, and a whole rabble rout of parish functionaries and professional agents. I did not know that I should have had to come to town this week, else I should have written to you."

And then Eustace asked after Mrs. St. Pierre, and appeared not sorry when he found that she was absent for the evening. He seemed very happy at the idea of having his visit to his cousins undisturbed by the presence of the lady of the house.

"Well, and how do you like London?" said Eustace; "are you spending a pleasant time?"

"Why, we have been scarcely long enough here to decide," said Caroline; "I think Louisa likes it more than I do."

"Oh! it is a charming place!" cried Louisa. "I long to know more of it. I feel, when I canter round the Park, and meet all the fashionables of the day, just as if I were in the beginning of the most delightful of things in the world."

"And what may that be?" said Eustace. "A ball, I suppose."

"No such thing; but a genuine good novel, with real every-day people sketched

vividly, and a most mysterious but perfectly natural plot, with not too much tragedy in it, but just enough to excite one's nerves."

"Ah! my fair coz, people get tired of novels; and the plot of life, with its endless recurrences of ups and downs, palls on the mind after some years, and wearies the spectator at last. But have you any news here?"

"Nothing particular," answered Caroline. "I suppose that you have heard all about Lord Rockforest?"

"No. What about him—what about him, pray?" cried Eustace, with extraordinary fervour.

So precipitate was the manner of Eustace in asking the question, and so eager was the tone of his voice, that both sisters looked towards him at the same moment. His eyes sparkled with curiosity, and his countenance was quite blanched. Both of the Mildmaye girls were greatly surprised.

"Why, Eustace," said Louisa, who was the first to speak, "how startled you are! Why should Lord Rockforest's name agitate you so?"

"I agitated!" laughed Eustace. "Not I. Why should I be agitated? I am not a bit so. Only that—sometimes you—I feel somehow or other—that, in short—you know—— Some time or other—it may be that——"

The curate had got up from his seat, while he was delivering himself thus incoherently. His appearance strongly belied his denial that he was agitated, and he looked a picture of confusion. It seemed that the name of Rockforest had awakened some recollection that he should rather not have brought before him. His cousins, if surprised before, were still more astonished at his singular incoherency of manner; the three formed a remarkable group. Caroline looked towards him with a mingled expression of reproof and alarm, giving additional interest to her fine features, which in general wore an air of such calmness of repose. Louisa's lips were wide apart; her disposition, more excitable than that of her sister, was soon roused, and her large and splendid eyes seemed to dilate in their sockets as they piercingly turned upon Eustace, who seemed more

confused than ever, as his cousins sought an explanation. He commenced,

"You need not seem so——"

At that moment his remark was cut short by a pealing knock at the door, which boomed through the quiet house. Eustace gave a visible start as he heard it. Louisa went to the window, and saw a carriage driving away from the door, and she supposed that it might have been cards of invitation left at the house.

"'Tis nobody!" she cried; and she sat down, looking again to Eustace, to see whether he would offer any explanation of his manner. She had just taken her seat, when the door of the drawing-room suddenly opened, and in walked, most unexpectedly, Mrs. St. Pierre.

Her appearance was quite unlooked-for, and evidently was most unwelcome to Eustace Mildmaye. When he saw who it was he was embarrassed. His presence was, also, equally unexpected by Mrs. St. Pierre, with whom Eustace was no great favourite since his declaration to Caroline. Mrs. St. Pierre saw his confusion, and jumped to the conclusion that Eustace had

either been speaking of her behind her back, or that he had been taking advantage of her absence to renew his addresses to Caroline. Nor was her sense of personal dignity—and she had rather too much of it—soothed by Eustace's rather elaborate expression of his satisfaction at seeing her in such perfect health, and of the happiness he felt in finding his cousins in such excellent guardianship.

“Um—m—m!” said Mrs. St. Pierre, with ever so slight an expression of a sneer over her fine matronly countenance. “You are as courtly and complimentary to me, Mr. Mildmaye, as if I were the Archbishop of Canterbury. But no matter for that.” Then turning to the Mildmaye girls, she said, “When I got to Mrs. Vyner's, I found that she was in a deep slumber, and I was told that it would be better not to disturb her to-night; and Lady Osborne gave me her carriage to bring me home, as I had dismissed my own. Well, Mr. Mildmaye, and what do you think of this business of Lord Rockforest's? Why, you seem still quite as-

tonished at my appearance amongst you ? I must be a terrible apparition."

"Eustace," said Louisa, "appears not to have heard of Lord Rockforest having horsewhipped Major Oliver, and about their duel at Boulogne."

"Not a word about it," said Eustace. "Dear me ! how very extraordinary ! A duel ! Oh ! how shocking ! Well, and was any one wounded ?"

"Lord Rockforest, it is said, is only slightly wounded," said Louisa.

"My dear child," cried Mrs. St. Pierre, "the evening paper was at Mrs. Vyner's, in the parlour, and I took it up while waiting, and it states that Lord Rockforest is severely wounded."

"Good Heavens !" ejaculated Eustace, "how very awful ! how very extraordinary ! Dear me ! how events are brought about !"

"Well," said Mrs. St. Pierre, who in her turn was equally surprised at the excitement shown by the curate, "if *that* were done on the stage it would have made an actor's fortune. But I forget :

you know Lady Rockforest, and possibly are interested about one connected with her."

"And what was the duel about?" asked Eustace.

"Oh!" replied Mrs. St. Pierre, "it is not for ladies to inquire into all such particulars. The facts, I believe, are not known accurately. I was in great hopes that Lord Rockforest would by this time have sown all his wild oats. What a pity that he should so mar his high prospects in life!"

And as these words came from Mrs. St. Pierre's lips, Caroline could not help recollecting how anxious the speaker had been not long before to promote a marriage between herself and the wounded peer.

Refreshments of tea and coffee were then served, and the conversation became general on the passing topics of the day. Eustace was much amused with some new stories of the absurd dance that Miss Fanny Bunbury was leading Mr. Baskervyll, and laughed heartily at the graphic

account, which Louisa Mildmaye gave of the way in which Miss Bunbury used to satirise herself and her "bookeared bridegroom to be," as the fantastic Fanny designated her lover.

"I was in the lobby of the House of Commons this afternoon," said Eustace. "I wished to get an order for the Speaker's gallery on to-morrow night. Mr. Baskervyll was there, and it amused me to see how well known he was, with his keen, sharp-visaged, critical face, and his eager way of speaking."

"What are you going to the House for to-morrow night?" asked Caroline. "Is there to be any good speaking?"

"Oh! 'tis a mere Poor-law question, in which, however, we clergymen are much interested. It is a case in which the Commissioners and Christianity are at war with each other, and I hear that Sir Vaughan Gwynne is to expose some pragmatic red-tapists. I am interested in the discussion, as one of our county members has given me notice, that in case a Committee is called for, I may, perhaps, be summoned as a witness to give evidence."

At the mention of Sir Vaughan Gwynne's name, a slight shade fell over Caroline's features. Mrs. St. Pierre looked towards her, and said,

"Ah! Sir Vaughan Gwynne is a choice specimen of what a country gentleman should be. He devotes his time and talents to the public from the purest motive."

"He ought to be a good speaker," said Louisa Mildmays; "he has such a fine voice, and is so fluent in conversation."

"We will have an opportunity," said Mrs. St. Pierre, "of hearing some good speaking to-morrow at Willis's Rooms. There is to be a meeting there for the purpose of procuring funds for a testimonial to Sir Charles Somerset, for his benevolent exertions in favour of the working classes. Only that his parliamentary attendance may interfere, I should not be surprised if Sir Vaughan were to be present."

The evening postman's knock was heard just at this moment, and Mrs. St. Pierre pulled the bell to give directions that

letters for her should be brought up at once, as she expected one from Devonshire, to give her news about her "poor, dear old schoolfellow Jane Teesdale, who had gone there for the air of Torquay."

In a few minutes the drawing-room door opened, and a female servant appeared with a salver and a single letter on it. Mrs. St. Pierre had fallen into the habit, in spite of all her love for regularity and external style, of being served oftener by female servants than is customary. The servant-woman who entered the room caught the notice of Eustace Mildmay; there was something so sinister in her appearance. From their particular vocation, clergymen have some facility in detecting the physiognomy of vice. It was the woman Crowder, whom the reader will recollect Mrs. St. Pierre having reproved on a certain occasion at Belvyddyr, when she half suspected that Crowder had been outside the door, listening to her conversation with the Mildmayes.

Crowder advanced to the table with the salver in her hand. Upon it was a letter,

which Mrs. St. Pierre took up. "Excuse me," she said, "while I just look at this note."

There was a few moments' pause in the conversation, while the Mildmayes waited to see whether Mrs. St. Pierre would tell them, was the news pleasing or otherwise from Devonshire. Eustace observed her take the note. As she opened it, the first expression of her face was that of surprise. In another moment there were unmistakable signs of displeasure over all her face. Her lips were closely shut, and what rarely occurred, a portentous frown darkened her brow.

"I hope nothing has happened," said Eustace, with an air of sympathy and interest. His cousins looked at the same moment to Mrs. St. Pierre, and were astonished to see how discomposed she was.

"I have been insulted," she cried, with some excitement in her voice; and looking, as Eustace thought, with some anger towards himself, she swept out of the room with an air of extreme and grave displeasure.

It was the work of a minute. The

cousins were left wondering what the letter could have been about. Each of them was equally perplexed, and Eustace was positively alarmed, lest he should unwittingly have given cause for offence to Mrs. St. Pierre. After staying for a short time he withdrew, but first begged that one of his cousins would send him a line in the morning, to assure him that he had not been the innocent cause of annoyance to Mrs. St. Pierre.

And the "rival sisters" were left to themselves, discussing from whom could have come the letter, and wondering still more at the extraordinary way in which Eustace had conducted himself when the name of Lord Rockforest had been mentioned.

CHAPTER X.

THE Mildmayes had lounged for a considerable time on the next morning without ringing to have the breakfast-things removed. They had studied the fashionable intelligence of the *Morning Post*, perused the account of a *fête* at a French, and read of the dinner at the Prussian, ambassador's. They had cursorily glanced at the notices of exhibitions of paintings, and Louisa was beginning for the third time to express her desire to see a favourite actress in one of her great parts, and to hope that she would appear in London this season.

Caroline was rising to desire the breakfast to be removed, when she heard a

knock at the hall-door. It was just eleven o'clock, and it was not often that visitors came early to Mrs. St. Pierre. While she was speculating who it might be, the door was thrown open, and in flounced Miss Bunbury, announcing herself. There she stood, fairfaced, freckled, and bounding with assurance, confounding vivacity with wit, and personality with satire, at once droll and ridiculous; and with her overpowering high spirits positively oppressive, and occasionally very vulgar, in spite of her desperate attempts to affect aristocratic grace.

"Ah! there the pair of you are! I knew that I should catch you. My dears, you look charmingly, both of you. Oh! Darky Ducky, you will be the belle of the season; and positively, Miss Greensleeves, London agrees with you amazingly. And what a charming room! What mighty pretty paper! La! it is so like what I used to draw at the school at Bath. Go on with your breakfast—don't mind me. La! what a pretty set of porcelain; that sugar-basin is positively enchanting. Well, and how are you both? And what con-

quests have you made? And have you got tickets for Willis's Rooms? Of course you have; with your influence, it is a mere matter of course. Well, Daddy Dryasdust will do as much for me. And who were you speaking to the other day at Rotten-row? I saw you in conversation with some gentleman there, but I could not get near you in time. I saw you both cantering by, and a cavalier with you, and then you pulled up and spoke to some one. Well! but how do you like my new bonnet—isn't the trimming pretty?—the ribbons are my own choosing. Oh! what fun we shall have shopping together. And la! I forgot: dear me! how is my dear, excellent Mrs. St. Pierre?"

It was certainly time that this ejaculatory torrent should cease. It was accompanied with so many turns and twistings of her person, and her light chirruping voice was so sharp and keen, that to one who had never met her before, the intrusion of Miss Bunbury would have been astonishing, if not alarming. But the Mildmayes were used to her forwardness and familiarity. Before they could answer a single

one of her questions, the door opened, and in walked Mrs. St. Pierre.

The lady of the house did not know that any person was with the Mildmaye girls. She had come into the room with a very serious expression of countenance, and it was not much removed from her when she found her hand suddenly grasped by Fanny Bunbury.

"My dear Mrs. St. Pierre, how delighted I am to see you! And how is my excellent friend, my kind, generous, noble-hearted Mr. St. Pierre? Is the lumbago gone? and are his spirits better? I need not ask how you are; you are looking——"

For once the flippant tongue was stopped. Mrs. St. Pierre was not just then looking "charmingly," as Fan Bunbury meant to have said. On the contrary, as the prattling tongue of the incessant Bunbury poured on, the face of Mrs. St. Pierre bore such evident marks of displeasure, that, incredible as the fact would appear, Miss Bunbury performed a miracle of her own accord, and hushed the Babel of her speech.

Mrs. St. Pierre was so cool, so half-contemptuous in her manner, that Fanny

Bunbury shrank back, subdued, if not dismayed. With stately dignity of manner Mrs. St. Pierre walked solemnly into a seat furthest away from the intruder, and put aside her question with significantly laconic style.

"I wished to say, Caroline," observed Mrs. St. Pierre, "that I intend going to-day to Willis's Rooms to the meeting for a testimonial to Sir Charles Somerset. One o'clock is the hour named, and if you and Louisa will come, you should be ready soon after twelve."

"Oh dear! that will be delightful for us all," said Fanny Bunbury. "My loving swain promised to take me there, as he says we shall have some admirable speaking, and I am so anxious to hear Sir Vaughan Gwynne."

Mrs. St. Pierre did not appear to reciprocate the joy that Miss Bunbury professed to feel. She could almost have changed her mind about going, but, besides that such an alteration of her plans would have been making too much of Miss Bunbury, she could not endure the loss of indulging in some philanthropic sensations.

The Mildmayes signified their intention of accompanying her.

Mrs. St. Pierre then gave a half-haughty stare at Miss Bunbury, as if she were inquiring what brought her visiting at that early hour of the morning. Nothing disconcerted, Miss Bunbury dashed confidently into the conversation.

“ I had the pleasure of meeting two old friends outside in the square, just now; one of them your relation, the young clergyman, whose Christian name I always forget. Let me think. Everard? — Ethelred? Eustace? Ah, that’s the very name! And young Mr. Wilmot was walking with him. They were both as deep in confabulation together as if they were settling the affairs of the state. I was speaking to them both, and had a laugh out of each of them, for all their gravity. They asked me after Mr. Baskervyll, and put in for invitations to my wedding; and for want of something better to reply, I began to quiz the clergyman about Lady Rockforest, and such a face of awful reproof as came over your clerical cousin’s face! He looked actually horrified.”

"It was excessively improper for you, Miss Bunbury, to have acted with so great levity, as to connect the name of a minister of God's Church with such a person as Lady Rockforest," said Mrs. St. Pierre.

"Well, positively, I ought to have had more respect for the Church," cried Fanny Bunbury; "but I must make up for it the next time that I meet Mr. Eustace Mildmaye. I wish all the clergy were like him. He is amazingly handsome: don't you think so, Caroline?"

And Caroline, at this sudden question, blushed to her very temples, while Mrs. St. Pierre looked still more displeased. Fanny Bunbury saw that the temperature was too hot for her. She respected wealth and station, and could not afford to affront so important a personage as Mrs. St. Pierre. She accordingly changed her manner, and with skilful tactics contrived to turn the conversation to the subject of her approaching marriage; and, knowing the weak point of Mrs. St. Pierre, she threw out sundry hints about plans for school-houses for the children of Mr. Baskervyll's tenantry, and intimated her earnest anxiety to

have the advantage of Mrs. St. Pierre's invaluable advice on certain philanthropic projects, which were looming largely in the distance. Like other humanitarians, Mrs. St. Pierre was only mortal, and she gradually became mollified under the influence of some very artfully-applied plasters of flattery, ingeniously administered to her by Miss Bunbury. So far did her satisfaction proceed, that Mrs. St. Pierre proffered a seat in the carriage to Willis's Rooms, to hear the speaking about Sir Charles Somerset and his exertions in favour of "The Dens of London Extirpation Society."

The invitation was cordially accepted, and Miss Bunbury promised to be ready punctually at one o'clock, when Mrs. St. Pierre and the Mildmayes should call upon her. Away she went, simpering through her sneers, and bottling up her suppressed laughter, until she could more conveniently explode it, when out of the hearing of Mrs. St. Pierre.

At the appointed hour Mrs. St. Pierre's carriage rolled away from Portman-square, and, after taking up Miss Bunbury, the

party proceeded onwards to Willis's Rooms. Almost the first person they saw was Mr. Wilmot, who came up to speak to them. He was a friend of Sir Charles Somerset, and anxious to promote his humanitarian hobbies, though only partially giving credence to all the theories proposed by him. He proceeded to get places for the party, but his difficulty was soon obviated by the eagerness shown on all sides to do honour to Mrs. St. Pierre. The virtuous wealthy make rapid way in a crowd of philanthropists. Spiritual natures, decked with jewels, are more fascinating to lovers of "progress" than homelier worshippers of the Good and the Fair.

The room was crowded with several notabilities in the humanitarian interest. As in every other mixed assembly, the frivolous and the superficial were largely mixed with the sensible and earnest. Two or three members of the Upper House, who did invaluable service to their own party, by exposing ruthlessly the social sores in the ranks of their opponents, were seated side by side with a couple of small-minded members for large constituencies;

and behind them were an amiable banker, with his coffers loaded with gold, and his mouth full of platitudes; and a pamphleteer *de omnibus rebus*, incessant in his advertisements for a constituency; and a newspaper divine, merciless in censure, dipping his cat-o'-nine-tails in vitriol, lacerator-general of his order; and a fluent platform orator was there, of the *genus* of stipendiary humanitarian, with his memory stocked with all the common-places of popular eloquence and the crack passages from the English essayists, mingled with quotations from the Eton grammar. There were not wanting materials in that motley throng for a satirist to exercise his harsh office upon.

But there were not absent those, who really redeemed that gathering from the charge of being an assembly for the purpose of self-laudation. There was to be seen, also, the hard-working rector, who had laboured in his parochial vocation, and had sought out the miserable without proclaiming his virtues; and many an unobtrusive worshipper of his Maker was there, and not a few of the noblest and

purest of the gentler sex were scattered amongst the merely "fashionable" prattlers about the "unfortunate poor people," and the necessity of doing something to save them from their "dreadful habits."

The Mildmayes were extremely interested with the scene, and they took pleasure in seeing some of the notorieties of the day pointed out to them. A bishop was in the chair; a noble earl proposed the first resolution, and stammered through his speech in the peculiar jerking manner acquired from the conversational style of what, by a figure of speech, is called "parliamentary *eloquence*." The oration was decidedly heavy, and very dull; and the noble speaker, with his delicate frame and sickly aspect, despite of all his numerous good qualities, failed to rivet attention. Some of the speakers stammered, others were insipidly fluent, and many more merely canted.

When Sir Vaughan Gwynne came forward to address the company there was a sort of hum through the meeting. Caroline heard the persons near her saying, "He's a vastly clever man;" "One of the

most rising men in public life ;” “ What a fine-looking man !” and the last remark could not help being echoed by Caroline’s heart, as she saw Sir Vaughan coming forward, with his calm countenance and bold, penetrating gaze, to address the meeting. His erect carriage, his deportment, at once manly and refined, his commanding height, his easy, careless grace, and even the style of his tasteful dress, commended themselves all at once to Caroline. The feeble and irresolute manner of previous speakers was like a foil to the coolness and perfect self-possession of Sir Vaughan Gwynne, and as the first sentences fluently rolled forth in manly and yet silvery tones from Sir Vaughan, Caroline could not help being deeply interested about him. In a few minutes, she knew not why, she felt her heart beating fast, and she experienced thrilling sensations, while Sir Vaughan, rising with the subject and becoming animated, launched forth into one of those brief but manly bursts of sentiment, which, if genuine and truthful, are almost certain to carry away a popular meeting. As the

cheers reverberated round the room, Caroline almost longed herself to take part in them, fascinated and excited by the stirring declamation of the brilliant speaker, who made the speech of the day, and who sat down amidst volleys of applause.

Nor were her sensations of pleasure unshared by several of the persons around her. Mrs. St. Pierre was radiant with triumph, and in perfect ecstasy at the brilliant exhibition of Sir Vaughan's great powers of eloquence. Louisa Mildmaye also was charmed, and cried to Caroline, "Oh! he's extremely eloquent. I never could have thought that he had such brilliancy." And many more around them were not less pleased.

"My dear, he's a perfect Demosthenes," cried the chattering Fanny Bunbury; "but, oh, wonderful! who is this that I see bustling up to the platform? I wonder can he be going to speak?"

In another minute way was made for Mr. Baskervyll of Baskervyll Park, a name that sounded vastly well in that aristocratic and humanitarian assemblage. He had long been one of the West-End notorieties

of London. His large purchases of books, his occasional patronage of rising artists, the manner in which his memory and great attainments were puffed and bepraised by some of the small fry of literary minnows, who fed their bodies by feeding his vanity,—his wealth, his fine house in Grosvenor-square, had all organised for Mr. Baskervyll a considerable degree of that anomalous thing called “a name,” made up of one part of legitimate distinction, and three parts notoriety.

He had been concealed from the observation of Mrs. St. Pierre's party by a pillar, and the intervening bulk of a corpulent philanthropist. He came forward to move a resolution, and with eager and nervous manner bustled forward to the front of the table, where the chairman was seated. Miserably sounded his broken voice and hissing utterance, after the resonant and muscular organ of Sir Vaughan Gwynne. The contrast was complete. Mr. Baskervyll set off at full gallop in chase of his subject. He fizzed, and fluttered, and floundered, and presented the ridiculous aspect of a hot and hasty man, with a

ghost of a voice, endeavouring to produce oratorical effect upon a crowd of impatient, fastidious people.

"Daddy Dryasdust is no Demosthenes, dear," whispered Fanny Bunbury to Louisa Mildmaye.

"Hush!" cried Louisa, with one of her supercilious frowns.

"My dear, poor Baskey is the best creature in the world; but his crest should not have been a stag, but a more long-eared quadruped. Don't be so cross, Louisa; 'tis I ought to be cross, after my betrothed making such an exposure of himself. But wait until I have got him in training for three months: I'll put sense into him."

"Miss Bunbury, you'll be overheard. I beg," said Louisa, "that you'll be more careful."

"Nonsense, child. If I cannot have a laugh at my lover before marriage, what is to become of me afterwards? But what are they at now?"

It appeared that one of the gentlemen who was to have seconded one of the motions was absent, and there was a want of some seconder. The secretary, Mr. Smirk-

well, was a very well-meaning man, who had no small tact, and he thought that it would compliment Mrs. St. Pierre if a relative of hers were called on to take part in the proceedings, and he mentioned the name of Eustace Mildmaye as the seconder. It was thought, also, that it would be well to have a country clergyman give his testimony to the services performed by Sir Charles Somerset.

Now, Eustace was well acquainted with those services, and could have written essays on them with the greatest fluency. But he was not accustomed to speaking in public, and he was taken at great disadvantage in being asked to come forward at a moment's notice. Caroline Mildmaye was anxious that he should appear creditably as a speaker. But she was deeply disappointed at his flushed face, his confused manner, and his hesitating delivery. The audience daunted and unnerved him. He would in support of the religion of the Cross have braved the lions in the amphitheatre; but he quailed before the sneer of fashion, and shrank from the cynical stare of the superciliously sympathetic friends of the mis-

rable. Eustace felt it to be a greater trial to his nerves to bear the dread chill of that fastidious throng before him, than to have followed Howard the philanthropist into the most fever-laden gaol in Europe.

Whatever the young clergyman felt himself, Caroline was certainly, and, we must say, unreasonably mortified at his exhibition. Shortly afterwards the meeting began to break up, and Caroline was not much pleased when Mrs. St. Pierre said,

“Eustace, dear Caroline, was never meant for a bishop. I never thought him likely to be an orator, but I really supposed that he had a much better manner than he has.”

But Mrs. St. Pierre's remarks were cut short by the approach of Sir Vaughan Gwynne, who came forward to speak to them. He was more courteous than usual, for his manners ordinarily were tinged with that severity that comes from a very decided character. On any other occasion Caroline would have been delighted to have complimented one who had given her so much pleasure by manly eloquence, but she felt mortified for the sake of her

cousin Eustace, and she could not find it in her heart to utter a compliment. Not a single word did she address to Sir Vaughan, either on his speech or on the meeting.

Eustace approached to speak to them, just as they were about to get into their carriage. At the same moment Mr. Baskervyll came forward, eager to address Miss Bunbury, and very glad to see her in the company of so unexceptionable a personage as Mrs. St. Pierre. Before he could say a word, Miss Bunbury burst forth :

“ There are the two orators of the day— Sir Vaughan and Mr. Baskervyll. You are both so eloquent, that one would think that the days of Pitt and Fox had come again.”

Sir Vaughan burst into a half-contemptuous laugh, and Mrs. St. Pierre looked displeased at so ridiculous an observation, which was heard plainly by the crowd on the footway. Louisa Mildmaye heard one young gentleman say to a lady, leaning on his arm,

"That's the Bunbury creature in the carriage."

"Oh, show me the Bunbury! I am dying to see her!" cried the young lady.

"*The Bunbury!*" thought Louisa Mildmaye to herself. "What a character our companion must be!"

Just then Mr. Baskervyll broke forth: "I am happy to inform you, Mrs. St. Pierre, that the reports about Lord Rockforest having been so severely wounded in the chest are entirely unfounded. I saw a private letter, and it appears that the ball only passed through the fleshy part of his arm. There is no chance this time, at least, of the peerage falling into abeyance."

While Mr. Baskervyll was saying these words, Louisa Mildmaye was greatly struck by the intense look of breathless interest with which Eustace Mildmaye regarded the speaker. She thought that she actually saw his upper lip quiver with emotion, and she touched Caroline, who had just taken her seat next her; but Caroline did not understand what Louisa meant, and mistook her meaning.

"I am so glad," cried Fanny Bunbury, "that Lord Rockforest is not seriously wounded. He is such a fine young man, and is so superior in appearance to many others of his order."

Mrs. St. Pierre gave a reproving look to Miss Bunbury, who threw herself back in the seat of the barouche in a gay, laughing mood, and kissed her hands to her antiquated lover, Mr. Baskervyll. The carriage then drove away.

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW hours afterwards, in the evening, as Louisa went into the bedroom of her sister Caroline, to speak to her on some engagement to a party, she was greatly surprised to observe the gravity of countenance with which Caroline was looking at a paper in her hand. She never before saw Caroline looking at once so grave and puzzled.

“Why! Caroline——” she was beginning; but the words died on her lips, as her sister looked in her face with an expression of vacancy.

Then observing, in her turn, the appearance of astonishment in the face of Louisa, the other sister advanced to meet

her, and took her hand in hers, as if something particular had occurred.

"Louisa, look at that!" And Caroline gave to her sister an open letter. Louisa read as follows :

"CAROLINE MILDMADE,

"You are about to wed your cousin Eustace. I order you not to do so at your peril, else you will bitterly regret it. Have a care what you are about !

"X."

Louisa's face flushed as she read it. She broke forth at once :

"The letter comes from some malignant person. There is not fun enough in it for a vulgar joke, and it is doubtless sent for the purpose of annoyance. Do not, dearest Caroline, put yourself in the power of its scandalous writer. Destroy it, and think no more about it."

"But, my dear sister," said Caroline, "what I am astounded at in the letter is the circumstance, that nobody but Mrs. St. Pierre, Eustace, you, and myself, had any knowledge of the matter to which the

letter refers. I enjoined Eustace to talk to nobody about what had passed between us, or the chance of our future union. Mrs. St. Pierre, for her own reasons, would not talk about it; and there is no chance that, directly or indirectly, she would sanction so mean and unprincipled a thing as writing anonymous letters. Is it not very strange?"

On reflection, Louisa saw that it was very curious, and had something even mysterious about it. She conjectured that some persons had fancied that they saw that there was an attachment between Caroline and her cousin Eustace, and had desired to give annoyance about it, though for what base motive she could not possibly divine. Caroline was ruffled and vexed about the letter, despite of all that could be said by Louisa upon the folly of giving heed to the vile artifices of the malignant writer. She gladly, however, caught at the suggestion of Louisa, to show it without delay to Mrs. St. Pierre.

On that very evening, after tea, Caroline showed the letter to Mrs. St. Pierre, who was even more astonished

than the sisters at the contents of the letter. She read it again and again, and was particularly struck with the remarkable fact, that the attachment and proposal of Eustace should have transpired.

"Depend upon it, my dear child," she said to Caroline, "that your clerical cousin has let the secret ooze out. I have no great opinion of his sense or discretion. He made a very poor figure at the meeting to-day, and I hope that he never paid his addresses elsewhere. Nay, let me not pain you, Caroline; but the only explanation that I can see in the matter is, that Eustace revealed it, somehow or other; and that some person, who had reasons to be interested about him, wished to prevent your marriage with him. But there is something very extraordinary about this, and it must be probed further. Eustace told me that he would not leave town until to-morrow afternoon; he is to dine to-day with Mr. Wilmot, to meet Sir Vaughan Gwynne and a party. Write to him a note, requesting him to come and breakfast here on to-morrow at ten o'clock."

Caroline gladly obeyed. She was really very grateful to Mrs. St. Pierre for the frank and cordial way in which she sympathised with her. She immediately despatched the note to her cousin's hotel, and all that evening much of the conversation turned on the character of Eustace. Mrs. St. Pierre gave utterance to the notion that something more than his peculiar relationship with Caroline was preying on his mind, and she noticed some traits of his manner that had also struck Caroline and Louisa themselves.

Nor did Mrs. St. Pierre omit dwelling, whether by intention or not, on the talents and character of Sir Vaughan Gwynne. She expatiated with evident pleasure on the brilliancy of his deportment at the meeting at Willis's Rooms, and enlarged with warmth on the likelihood of his becoming one of the leading characters in England.

Upon the next morning Eustace was punctual at the breakfast-table. He stood rather in awe of Mrs. St. Pierre. Like other clergymen, he felt that in our English society, ladies possessed of high station,

arising from the union of birth, fashion, and great wealth, are extremely difficult to deal with. Great peers, with dukedoms, marquises, and territorial estates, can be managed from the political or property point of view ; but great ladies have, in addition to their social position, the vast pretensions arising from female ambition, which, with many fascinating qualities, often overstrains its power, and misjudges its effect.

Eustace, however, had come in good spirits, as he was glad on any terms to be near his Caroline, who looked particularly beautiful in her morning costume, which became her perfectly well. He was rather surprised, however, to observe something like a peculiar air of gravity in her demeanour.

After breakfast, Mrs. St. Pierre said, "Let us come up to my room." And the party adjourned there. As they were ascending the stairs, Eustace Mildmaye felt that Mrs. St. Pierre had some settled purpose in the interview, and he dreaded lest it was to interpose her decided opposition to his union with Caroline.

"Sit down, girls," said Mrs. St. Pierre, addressing both Caroline and Louisa; "you also have got something to look at this morning."

Mrs. St. Pierre enjoyed vastly the sensation that she was causing by her imposing gravity of manner. She went to her bureau and drew out her portfolio.

"Eustace, I wish to show you a couple of remarkable letters. Your cousin Caroline received this letter yesterday." And she handed to him the anonymous letter signed "X.," which the reader has already seen.

Eustace read the letter with great attention. The three observers in the room watched him with the closest interest. Louisa was the most careless of the three, though she dilated her beautiful large eyes in staring well at her cousin as he read the note. Caroline gazed on him with anxiety stamped on every feature. Mrs. St. Pierre eyed him with cold and scrutinising penetration, in which a physiognomist might have detected something like an expression of suspicion.

"It's a vile, odious attempt to give annoyance," cried the clergyman.

"Evidently so," said Mrs. St. Pierre. "But who could have found out that there was any kind of engagement between Caroline and yourself? Is there not something very strange in that?" And she looked steadily at Eustace.

And Eustace at once saw that there was really something quite remarkable in it.

Mrs. St. Pierre then continued, while intently gazing at the clergyman, "Do you know the handwriting? Can you form any conjecture as to it?"

Eustace seemed puzzled, and his scrutiniser thought that he slightly changed colour. In a couple of minutes he answered,

"No, I do not think that I ever saw it before."

Mrs. St. Pierre then rose from her seat, and went again to the bureau. She brought another letter in her hand, and said, "Caroline and Louisa, you have not seen this letter. Read it." They did so. It was to this effect :

“MADAM,

“You had better, on no account, continue your matchmaking between Lord Rockforest and Miss Mildmaye. You may yet repent it.

“CAUTION.

“Mrs. St. Pierre.”

“That letter,” said Mrs. St. Pierre, “I received a few evenings ago, when you may recollect that I left the room, ruffled and displeased. It was no wonder that I should have been displeased; and at first, I am almost ashamed to confess that I suspected that you, Mr. Mildmaye, had something to do with it.”

“Well, that is really very unkind of you, Mrs. St. Pierre;” and Eustace appeared greatly agitated at being thought guilty of writing anonymous letters.

Mrs. St. Pierre, however, quickly explained that she entertained the suspicion only to dismiss it indignantly from her mind. She noticed, however, that the young clergyman was exceedingly agitated, and that he looked very confused; and the same circumstance did not escape the no-

tice of his two cousins. They were both equally surprised at his conscious appearance.

"There is some shameful, some scandalous secret somewhere in all this," said Caroline. "Here are two letters, written to different members of the same family, both interfering in the affairs of the supposed intended marriage of one party."

Then the handwriting of the letters was examined. They did not exhibit the same character. The first letter, signed "X.," was evidently, even ostentatiously, a disguised hand, approaching to the character of printed letters. The other was an old-fashioned hand, with long and pointed letters. There was nothing in either of them to indicate whether they came from male or female pens.

The party continued conversing for some time about them, and the more the Mildmayes thought about the matter, the more were they surprised. The case was mooted whether Lady Rockforest could have anything to do with either of them. But then came the question, how could she have any knowledge of the subject at all? It was

not likely, either, that she would interfere in any way to prevent the marriage of her son, Lord Rockforest ; and, on the other hand, it was supposed that she had no ill-will towards Eustace Mildmaye.

After discussing the letters from various points of view, the conference broke up. Eustace, after the interview, left a very unfavourable influence upon Mrs. St. Pierre, and after he had taken his departure, she said,

“ Well, dearest Caroline, again I tell you, in presence of Louisa, that I deeply regret that you should ever have formed an attachment in that quarter. Nay, I am not going to intrude upon forbidden ground, or to dwell upon our conversation of this day at any length ; but nature will have its way, and I own to having a prejudice against Mr. Mildmaye, even though he is my near relation.”

“ He certainly gives me,” said Louisa, “ the idea that he has some dreadful secret hanging on his mind. His manner is so absent at times, he seems so moody, and there is such a general air of uneasiness

over him, that I too am beginning to conceive a prejudice against him."

"Oh, do not say so!" said Caroline; and she burst into tears. "Oh, I am so unhappy about it. I knew already that Mrs. St. Pierre had a strong feeling against my cousin, and here now is my beloved sister disparaging the man on whom I had fixed my affections. And I, too, am beginning to feel so uneasy and so very uncomfortable about him."

Mrs. St. Pierre and her sister at once, and with the greatest tenderness, comforted and soothed Caroline. They reminded her that she would have ample time before her for ascertaining whether there was, in the case of Eustace, any cause why she should be permanently unhappy about him; and they said all that was hopeful—that everything suspicious about him would be satisfactorily cleared up, taking care to urge that very possibly they were too suspicious about the matter. But Caroline was deeply distressed, and though she smothered her feelings as well as she could, there yet remained during all that day, and for several days

afterwards, a most unpleasant and even ominous boding of ill, as if some catastrophe was hanging over her.

Little did she know, poor thing, what she would have to endure in consequence of her conditional engagement with her cousin, the young clergyman. Little could she have foretold—— But we must not anticipate, but proceed with her adventures. Essayists and sentimentalists may reflect. Novelists and historians must recount.

CHAPTER XII.

It was now the commencement of the London season, and May Fair and Belgravia were crowded. It was one of the most brilliant seasons that had occurred for some years, and the Mildmayes were astonished with the variety of attractions which the fashionable and influential friends of Mrs. St. Pierre spread before them. Caroline would have enjoyed the fascinations of the town if she had been more at ease in her mind; but Louisa thoroughly entered into the gaiety of the life that sparkled around her. Animated with good spirits, and unclouded with care, she decidedly cast into the shade the personal attractions of her "rival sister," and

the majority of connoisseurs were for once on the side of the greatest number, in deciding without doubt that Louisa was decidedly the most charming of the two. Some even wondered how they ever could have been called "rivals." Yet if poor Caroline had been more happy in her mind, she would have, perhaps, outshone the effect of the brilliant and captivating Louisa; certainly, she would have disputed the pre-eminence in attractiveness. As it was, however, Caroline was decidedly in the shade—a point which more than ever made Mrs. St. Pierre most anxious to have Caroline become Lady Gwynne.

In the mean while, "Miss Louisa Mildmaye" had decidedly made a great sensation. The men all talked about her: old beaux called her charming, dandies voted her to have "a deucedly good style of beauty," boy-lieutenants and cornets of the Guards were rapturous about her eyes, and amongst women she produced such an effect that she was constantly talked of and enviously criticised. One fair censor said that "she talked certainly too much," and another answered "that it was to show

her teeth, which were certainly very fine, though it was such a pity her mouth was so large." She was too tall for one, too broad for another—was over-dressed according to one judge, and not dressed enough according to another. All the ladies, by some species of instinct, always concluded with the opinion that "though Miss Louisa Mildmaye had the advantage in company over her sister, still, that when Miss Caroline Mildmaye was more known, she was much more to be liked than her younger sister." And then some beauties, whose roses were beginning to show some symptoms of withering, insinuated that Louisa Mildmaye was decidedly very sarcastic; and then several would chorus in to the note that "there could be no doubt about *that*."

As for Louisa herself, we cannot conceal the fact that she was completely dazzled with London and its enjoyments. She must have been blind not to have perceived that she excited feelings of admiration. She read the effect produced by herself in the eager gaze of gentlemen of all ages, and she heard it in the buzzing whispers of the

thronged drawing-rooms in which she moved. Even in the highest quarters, and in the opinion of the most courtly critics in this island, the fascinating smile, graceful manner, and large hazel eyes of Louisa Mildmaye had been admired and condescendingly praised in terms which, of course, were doubly complimentary from judges so illustrious by station and fastidious by habits. It would be very difficult to describe the sensations enjoyed by Louisa. Her keen intellect and active fancy increased the range, and intensified the reality of her delights. She had a mind that could appreciate with the gusto of a connoisseur the splendour of aristocratic banquets, and the elaborate elegance of the town-palaces of our nobility. She took the heartiest delight in seeing and conversing with some of the great titled dames, who have for more than two generations ruled with undisputed sway over the great territory that stretches from the west of Berkeley-square down to Carlton House-terrace and along to Belgravia. She enjoyed the crowded *soirées* of the then Countess C—p—r's almost as much as the

more limited circles that on Wednesday were occasionally assembled in Berkeley-square. In her character there was much of the freshness of genius. She was not a mere thing of talent, trained and tutored into cleverness, educated up to brilliancy : she bloomed forth as one of the flowers of fashionable life with native force and grace ; and the greatest of all her charms was that *peculiar something*, which gave electric vividness to her wit, and beamed so brightly in her airy and animated conversation.

During this gay period of the first excitement of making a great sensation, Louisa had not utterly given up Henry Wilmot, whose graces and attractions had produced much effect upon her, though we are sorry to say, as we did before, that her characteristic wilfulness had sported with his evident affection for her. Ever and anon his image would intrude upon her recollection. Twice she was in the same room with him in crowded parties, and he did not appear to court recognition by her, though once or twice, in the middle of the dance, she thought that she dis-

cerned him looking towards her with an expression in which disappointment and affection were combined. On the latter occasion she noticed also that he danced with a young heiress from Bristol—Miss Fanny Lucas—and they appeared to be on the friendliest terms. A few mornings afterwards, Caroline read aloud, in the *Morning Post*, a paragraph taken from a provincial journal :

“ ‘It is said that a beautiful and wealthy heiress of England will shortly be united to a young gentleman of highly promising abilities, at present engaged in the official service of the Crown.’ ”

“That must refer to Mr. Wilmot,” said Louisa; and, in saying so, she felt a throb of pain. Of course, she told Caroline her reasons for thinking so, based upon the cordial feeling that seemed to have existed between them at the party alluded to. Caroline, with some hesitation, was disposed to acquiesce in the surmise, though she expressed an opinion that it was a wonder that Miss Lucas did not look higher.

On that very evening Louisa was at a

grand ball, to which her sister was not quite well enough to go. Never did Louisa look more engaging; and though, during the day, her conscience experienced many an uneasy twinge about her treatment of Wilmot, and though she felt that she had loved him, still, in the excitement of the ball, her spirits rose with the occasion, and amid brilliant partners in the waltz, and beautiful music, and gaily-decorated rooms, she experienced the sensations of pleasure which she derived from the brilliant scenes of fashionable revels.

Just after she had been whirled in the circles of the waltz with a youthful Guardsman of indomitable dancing powers, but inimitable insipidity of conversation, Louisa stood aside with her partner amidst the throng of lookers-on, and she caught the expression of admiration stamped on more than one face. Suddenly, however, she was riveted by the peculiar expression of a remarkable countenance, which passed through the circle of observers. She could only see the face, and could not distinguish the figure. It was extremely pale,

but it had something of the glow of enthusiasm flashing over it, and there could be no mistake but that those brilliant black eyes were eagerly gazing at Louisa Mildmaye. She thought that she had seen the face before, but just then she could not remember where, but its features, as they then appeared, caused in her peculiar sensations of curiosity and surprise. In a moment or two the face disappeared, and she could not discern where the person to whom it belonged had vanished.

There are certain thrilling moments in our lives when we experience emotions, as if the fate of future years was trembling on the present instant. Every one, in public or private, in high or in low life, has felt that strange sensation. Men of the world feel it, as well as the secluded student. We think of Shakspeare, and the "tide in the affairs of men," and with mingled emotions of fear and wonder we pause in expectation of the event.

Such were just at that instant the very kind of sensations experienced by Louisa Mildmaye. That strange face, with its remarkable expression, had seized hold of

her imagination. It was too remarkable to be forgotten like those of the graceful and conventional countenances around her, and she longed to meet it again. But Lady Elderton's parties were always almost as thronged as the grand day at Ascot Races, and Louisa did not meet with it, though ever and anon she eagerly turned her eyes round in search of it.

Louisa was engaged soon afterwards in conversation with a pauper German prince, whose talk was of galleries and pictures, and who was more fitted to wield the pen of a critic than the bow and arrows of the Boy of Love. Any other partner would have been thinking of Louisa Mildmaye's eyes and vivacity, but the prince was thinking of showing off his profundity upon the picturesque. He recognised the most fashionable and famous of English artists near him, and Louisa was soon stunned by the vehement volubility of the princely amateur. Louisa caught the expression of humour on the face of the great artist standing near, to whom she was slightly known. "Raphael, Correggio, and stuff" soon darkened the air in a Germanesque

cloud of smoky æsthetics that the prince should have consumed himself. The great artist sighed for his release, and, while Louisa was archly looking at the bored painter, the latter suddenly said,

“I am really not competent to inform your Serene Highness on the subject, but here comes a countenance with a ‘*Siste Viator*’ expression. Has Lord Rockforest been yet presented to your Highness?”

Louisa turned her head, and there, standing near, with his arm in a sling, and the appearance of an invalid, was the owner of the remarkable face with which she had been so much struck. Yes! It was none other than Lord Rockforest himself. His face was much thinner than when she had seen him at Belvyddyr; illness had given to him a more intellectual aspect; his countenance would have passed as a spiritual one, but that now and again something slightly sinister was discernible in its expression.

“That face—this hour—are connected with my history,” said Louisa; and her body thrilled with a strange sensation.

And Louisa was right. That face—that hour—*were* connected with her history!

Lord Rockforest was presented to his Serene Highness Prince Aldemar of Spritzenberg-Spellingen. For politeness' sake his lordship condescended to hear some of the cant of connoisseurism, but soon he made an opportunity of paying his special attention to Louisa. He inquired after Mrs. St. Pierre, and took notice that Miss Caroline Mildmaye was absent from the revels. His manner was more subdued than when Louisa had met him at Belvyddyr, and she observed how gentle were the tones of his voice. She could not avoid inquiring after his health, and in a few minutes she found herself conversing with him very pleasantly. There was, certainly, something Byronic in his corsair-like expression; and women often like "the half-savage, half-soft" style of manly beauty. Lord Rockforest never looked so handsome before; and as he walked through a quadrille with Louisa, she more than once heard him referred to in a way that enhanced his consideration in her eyes.

That night, as she lay down to rest, she could not help feeling that a crisis was impending in her fate. It was very plain to her that Lord Rockforest admired her exceedingly. There could be no mistaking the look of interest with which he regarded her. He had title, wealth, a leading position; despite of his defects, he was what would be called handsome; he had a manly figure, and was reported to be a man of courage; of his *sang-froid* in his duel numerous anecdotes were told. Louisa's heart was unoccupied, save when ever and anon the recollections of a lost lover—Wilmot—intruded themselves upon her, and then she tormented herself with thinking anxiously, even if Wilmot were again at her feet, whether she should accept one in his comparatively lowly sphere. "No! He had left her; it was not she who coquetted with him." And then, with the sophistry of pride, she threw all the blame on him. "So he was going to marry for fortune too! A Bristol heiress captivated the romantic and sentimental Wilmot!" And then she would laugh, and we are sorry to record that it was

with bitterness; and ever and anon she would catch herself going to cry.

Ah, poor Louisa! you suffered not a little pain then, in return for your saucy coquetry and pretty wilfulness towards one whose true love you had too disdainfully sported with—a thoughtlessness of which you afterwards repented.

CHAPTER XIII.

It was as might have been foreseen. The wooing of Lord Rockforest was earnest, speedy, and successful. Within three weeks from the time that Louisa had met him at Lady Elderton's ball, he was accepted as her future husband, and preparations were ordered for their nuptials.

The first word of everybody, upon the news being made public, was, "that all rivalry between the sisters was now at an end;" "Miss Caroline Mildmaye would never make so great a match;" and more to the same effect. Others, also, affirmed that *they* "always knew that Miss Louisa Mildmaye would be the first to be married;" and many more would ring the

changes on the good fortune of the future Lady Rockforest; whilst some, too, were to be heard auspicating for her a happier fate than that of the still living mother of the noble peer to whom Louisa Mildmaye was betrothed !

To say the truth, it was a very decided drawback in the pleasure of the match that there should be such a person in the Catesby connexion as the too notorious Lady Rockforest. Mrs. St. Pierre felt it; and Caroline Mildmaye (though she did not talk of it much) was even more dissatisfied with that painful fact than Louisa herself. She thought it rather singular that she had not heard a word from her cousin Eustace on the subject, though it was she who had written to him the news about Louisa's match, and she could not help feeling very great curiosity about the anonymous letters that had been so strangely sent to her and Mrs. St. Pierre. She waited for some days, and wrote to him again, expressing her fears that he was ill.

Louisa sometimes almost repented of her precipitation in having accepted Lord

Rockforest, and strange feelings of dread and apprehension would flit across her mind. She dreamed uneasily at night, and more than once she rose from her pillow with anxious and unrefreshed spirits. Louisa, though generally in good health, and with no unsoundness of constitution, was nervous and excitable, and her mind, ill at ease, began to diminish the look of vivacity and cheerfulness that usually sat upon her expressive features.

For the first time, also, we are sorry to record that something like estrangement took place between the sisters. There was something awkward in the fact that one sister had accepted the lover rejected rather sternly by the other. When Lord Rockforest, at Belvyddyr, had offered his hand to Caroline, the latter, in speaking of him to Louisa, had in many ways disparaged him. The rumours which had existed of his dissipated habits, and alleged excesses of his in Italy, had been commented on by Caroline, and Louisa perfectly well recollected how her sister had said that "she feared whoever should be

the wife of Lord Rockforest would not be a happy woman."

Finding that Eustace had not answered her letter, Caroline was about to address him again, when they were startled one morning with the intelligence that Eustace was extremely ill, and that fever was apprehended. With a woman's presentiment, Caroline could not help thinking that this illness of her cousin had, in some way or other, been brought on by the news that she had told him of Louisa having accepted the hand of Lord Rockforest. She could give no reason for her opinion, but nevertheless she felt it, and impelled by some instinct, she resolved to visit her cousin, and let him not be neglected amongst strangers.

But when she announced her intention, Mrs. St. Pierre made many and weighty objections. It was dangerous; it was, perhaps, not quite delicate, under the peculiar circumstances of the case; it was very injudicious for Caroline, to say the least, to go and attend upon the young clergyman. But Caroline pleaded eloquently in favour

of her determination, and attended by the experienced housekeeper of Mrs. St. Pierre, she started for her cousin's cottage near Dryford.

She had not been there since the time when Louisa and herself had been living in obscurity there, after her father's worldly misfortunes! What changes had occurred since then! How many acquaintances had she made—how much of the world had she seen! With subdued feelings, and with some tremors of anxiety, she approached the cottage where her cousin the clergyman lay, and hastened to inquire after his health.

The fever had gone off; the danger was over for the time, but it was possible there might be a relapse. Admitted to the chamber where lay the invalid, she saw him jaded and pallid, and far more weakened than, in the time, she could have anticipated. She noticed, also, what a wild, strange look was in his eyes, and it was not without some feeling of horror that she fancied he might get insane, for it flashed across her memory that in his mother's family there was madness.

Eustace tried to smile when he saw her, but it was a painful effort, and Caroline dreaded that, under the excitement of seeing her, he would faint.

"I am sorry—I am glad that you are come. How are they all at Belvyddyr?"

The incoherence of the language, and his forgetting that she had recently been staying in London, showed very plainly that his memory had been weakened by the illness. He continued:

"How is Mr. St. Pierre, and how is Mrs. St. Pierre?"

Not a word did he ask of Louisa. In a few minutes afterwards he inquired after Sir Vaughan Gwynne, and tried to recollect some dream that he had about him: still not a word about Louisa, or her marriage, or Lord Rockforest. This circumstance, however slight, did not pass unnoticed by Caroline.

Doctor Goer was then announced, a medical practitioner of considerable intelligence, who knew Caroline's family well, having attended on it for many years. Caroline was glad to see him, and retired to allow the physician to see his patient

undisturbed. When the doctor came from the sick-chamber, Caroline eagerly inquired after the exact state of the invalid.

"Danger is over now, I think," said Doctor Goer; "but your cousin, Miss Mildmaye, is a very bad subject for a brain fever. He is extremely sensitive, has a high nervous temperament, and he lives too much of a purely intellectual life. He inherits his mother's constitution, and he will require particular attention. But I hope he will get over this attack, and that he will soon be as well as ever. By the way, in strict confidence, will you excuse me for asking whether you have any reason to think that Mr. Mildmaye had recently any cause for mental excitement?"

Caroline was excessively startled at the question, and she answered in the negative, declaring that she knew of nothing that could have annoyed him in any way.

"Because," continued Doctor Goer, "more than one person has remarked that for two or three days before your cousin was taken ill his manner was extremely flurried; and one person told me that he met him walking by himself in a lonesome

part of Mr. Thornhill's park, and that Mr. Mildmaye's countenance appeared to be contorted with anguish. You know my respect for your family, Miss Mildmaye, and that I would be loth to intrude inquisitively into its affairs, but it has certainly struck me that my reverend young friend has had some weight upon his mind for some time past."

Traces of surprise appeared upon Caroline's countenance as these words came from the lips of Doctor Goer. So, then, even strangers joined in the suspicion that her cousin Eustace had a secret weighing on his mind!

The eyes of Doctor Goer rested with calm expression. There was nothing very piercing in his countenance. The worthy physician spoke just what he felt, and he evidently had no desire to be taken into the confidence of Caroline Mildmaye. Nor, indeed, had he the least suspicion that the same notice of Eustace having a secret cause for anxiety had occurred to any of the young clergyman's immediate relatives.

"It is very extraordinary," said Caro-

line. "You surprise me very much indeed. I am greatly concerned at it."

"Nay," said Doctor Goer, "it is but a conjecture after all, and I really have no sure grounds to form an opinion upon. Your cousin's constitution would not, however, bear any long strain upon it; and if he ever had much trouble on his mind, I should be greatly alarmed for his health."

After Doctor Goer had retired, Caroline saw her cousin again. She noticed the wildness that appeared in his eyes, and she even exaggerated to herself the appearance of anxiety on his pallid face. She was greatly alarmed and agitated, and when she retired from Eustace's sick chamber, she hastily entered into the apartment prepared for her, and flinging herself on her knees, burst into tears. The sight of one that she had so loved thus brought low by sickness, had been too much for one unused to painful spectacles. All the kindness that Louisa and herself had received from poor Eustace flashed across her mind. She recollected the beautiful way in which the young clergy-

man had comforted the bereaved sisters, when their dear father was so suddenly taken from them ; and how he had helped to dispel the dark clouds of gloom that settled over them when the "rival sisters" found themselves deprived of affluence and station. Many a kind act, many a generous expression, and many a loving look of Eustace's then passed before Caroline's memory, and, utterly overcome, she sobbed heavily as the image of her amiable kinsman was present to her mind.

That night she had no rest, and she tossed to and fro on her pillow in a state of nervous suffering. Now and again she would leave her chamber, and steal to the room of Eustace to see that the nurse was not absent from her post. The doctor had left directions that Eustace was to sit up on the next day for a couple of hours ; and the nurse told Caroline, with some cheerfulness, "that once Mr. Mildmaye was in his sitting-room, he would rapidly get well."

And for the two or three next days the prediction of the nurse appeared to be nearly verified, for certainly Eustace did

rapidly improve, as he found himself out of his sick-chamber in his cheerful little sitting-room, opening on a small grass garden, gay with shrubs and flowers. His anxious look seemed to be fading away; his eye appeared to brighten with confidence, and his voice lost its languor. Caroline would sit near his sofa, and read to him at intervals. He made her read to him from the *One Book*, and he appeared to enjoy its words of healing balm for the bruised mind with more sacred joy when they were borne to his ears on the soft and rich tones of his beautiful cousin's voice. At intervals, also, she would read to him from one of the journals of the day; but he appeared not to care about the news, and his greatest happiness was to hear Caroline's soft, low voice reading to him the words of consolation.

CHAPTER XIV.

NEARLY a week had now passed since Caroline's arrival at the cottage, and still not a word had Eustace spoken about Louisa's marriage, and Caroline was beginning to think that it was time for her to return to Mrs. St. Pierre. One evening, after tea had been removed, as Eustace was seated in an easy-chair, Caroline was startled at hearing Eustace suddenly say,

"Caroline, I have a great secret to tell you."

The words came like a thunderbolt upon her. They were utterly unexpected at the time, and yet they touched upon a chord, which vibrated immediately under their

influence. Caroline looked up hastily from her work, and saw Eustace gazing on her with a mournfully earnest regard.

"Yes," he cried, "I have a most important circumstance to communicate to you. My mind has been troubled with it for some time, and I hesitated about divulging it. But I think it right that you should now be informed of it."

"You astonish me, Eustace. What can it be about?" said Caroline, half dissembling the state of her opinions on what she had for some time suspected.

"I am not quite well enough to tell it to you now," said Eustace; "but on to-morrow, after breakfast, I have much to say to you, and as the doctor now allows me into the air, I will relate to you what it concerns you much to know, and what must not on any account be longer concealed."

Caroline heard him with breathless attention, and her woman's curiosity to know what the secret could be was wound up to the uttermost. She longed that Eustace would even then communicate what had been pressing on his mind. But she

did not like to fidget, at the approach of night, one in Eustace's weak condition of body, and she contented herself with resolving to wait patiently for the next day.

But often that night she turned the question over, about whom, or on what subject, was the secret? Did it refer merely to Eustace himself? Or was she concerned in it, or Louisa, or both of them? Was it on family affairs? If so, what kind of revelation was she to expect? These circumstances would be turned by her over and over again, and at last she fell asleep, much irritated with anxiety.

She dressed herself hastily on the next morning, and thought that breakfast could never be over soon enough. Eustace appeared to be slower than usual in making his appearance, but in reality it was Caroline's own anxiety to come at the secret. Her cousin was not late; it was not much after ten, and he had since his illness appeared at his usual hour at the breakfast-table.

At last he came, and Caroline was all eagerness to have everything managed so as that there might be no interruption to

Eustace while he told the secret in his possession. He looked better than usually on that morning, and he seemed almost like himself. He munched half a roll with something like a healthy appetite, and he appeared to have regained much of his lost cheerfulness. Breakfast was at last over; the servant had removed the tray; dinner had been decided about, and arrangements discussed for a short drive in the afternoon.

And now came the moment when the secret which had been pressing upon Eustace was to be divulged.

Caroline shut the door carefully, pulled half the blind down, as if full sunlight should not be let into the room while a secret was being told. For the tenth time she set the room to rights again, and then at last drew her chair close to Eustace, expecting that of his own accord her cousin would open the subject on which she was so anxious to hear him speak. But Eustace made no sign of going to speak.

"Well, Eustace," said Caroline, "you said last night that——"

Her words were cut short by the servant

coming in to say that Mr. Isaacs, the parish clerk, was outside, and asked whether he would be allowed to see Mr. Mildmaye.

"Ah, yes! by all means," said Eustace; "Isaacs has been very attentive in calling to inquire about me. I shall see him with pleasure."

Caroline's temper was for the moment a little ruffled, as any woman's might have been when baulked in hearing a secret that she longed to know. She left the room, and Mr. Isaacs stayed for nearly half an hour, and Caroline got fidgetty, and said that Mr. Isaacs was staying too long, and she was meditating breaking up the interview between the young clergyman and his subordinate official, when the latter retired.

Then Caroline returned to the room, and sat down, and hoped that her cousin would begin, when a pony-chaise drove up with Doctor Bentinck, the portly rector of a neighbouring parish, who was very anxious to see the reverend invalid, and Eustace was very glad to see the new visitor; and Caroline had again to control her anxiety

to fathom the secret that pressed upon her clerical cousin's mind.

At last Doctor Bentinck retired, and Caroline and Eustace were again left alone; and now the moment was approaching when whatever had so long lain in the clergyman's breast would be divulged.

"I do not forget, my dear Caroline," said Eustace, "that I told you that I had a great secret to communicate—and it is indeed a very great one—and it has long lain heavily on my heart, and I have had great difficulties with myself before I resolved to mention it. I have now made up my mind to tell it to you, but it cannot be told all at once in a breath, and it will require some time to narrate. I feel myself fatigued at this moment, but after luncheon I will tell it to you."

Such an address was enough to tantalise the expectations of Caroline, already sufficiently wound up; but a couple of hours would pass speedily, and then she should know all. And so, recollecting that there were various petty household cares to look after for Eustace's comfort, she

left him to repose, after the fatigue of receiving visitors, and retired again.

When luncheon-hour had arrived, Caroline found Eustace very much recovered from the talking that had been inflicted on him in the morning, and he appeared in good spirits. He ate heartily, and enjoyed the glass of Madeira ordered for him by his medical adviser, and said,

"Do you know, Caroline, that instead of the afternoon drive, I should enjoy a short turn outside on the road, under the lime-trees. The place is secluded, and then I can speak to you at ease."

And soon Caroline's bonnet was on her head, and with a light cloak thrown over him, and a staff in his hand, the young clergyman was by her side, and they were walking together towards a very romantic part of the road that ran near the cottage. A great view over a well wooded country was laid clear to the sight, and a high and dry footway afforded good ground for promenaders. There were few or no passers-by, and it was no unsuitable place for a quiet talk.

They walked on together until the road

came to an abrupt turn, where it diverged into a thickly shaded valley, from which the sunlight was excluded, and there was an awkward crossing at the corner. They therefore turned away from where the road branched off, intending to walk to and fro in sight of the noble prospect stretching before them.

After a turn or two, Eustace began :

“Yes, Caroline, the subject of Louisa’s marriage has much occupied my attention, and I did not reply at the time to your letter announcing it, because considerations were involved which could be better explained in personal intercourse than by letter. I was not surprised that Louisa should be sought for in marriage by a person of the highest station. Grace and beauty like hers, though even these might possibly be excelled” (and while the young clergyman spoke these latter words his voice was tremulous, as he stole a glance at Caroline, over whose countenance a slight flush passed)—“yes ! I say, such grace and beauty as hers are almost sure to win distinction, even in London. But

with respect to the propriety of the choice that she has made——”

They were just then at the corner where the road turned abruptly, and the noise of an approaching carriage and the cracking of a postilion's whip was heard. Eustace paused in his remarks, and Caroline and himself stood still while the carriage whirled round the corner from the London road. It passed close to them. It was an open barouche, and Caroline was astonished to see Mrs. St. Pierre and her sister Louisa seated in it, along with a gentleman at the far side, whose face Caroline did not at once catch. In an instant the barouche was stopped, and with nimble feet Louisa rapidly alighted, and hastened to speak to her sister and cousin.

“ You see, Cary, we have taken you both by surprise, but Mrs. St. Pierre would have it so. Eustace, I rejoice to see you out of your sick-room. You are looking wonderfully well, considering the severity of your attack; and I am sure that you will be glad to see my betrothed, who, like a true cavalier, would insist on accompanying his ladye-love from town.”

As she spoke, she turned round, and Lord Rockforest, alighting from the carriage, stood before them. Caroline went forward to greet him with friendly warmth, but in a moment she was struck with the expression of astonishment that sat on the peer's countenance, as the latter looked towards the invalid clergyman. She quickly turned round, and beheld the face of Eustace as white as paper, looking exactly as if he had seen a ghost. There was even a look of mental horror stamped on the young clergyman's countenance. If Lord Rockforest had been an apparition from the grave, Eustace might have stared with that glazed look of fear!

"Good Heavens! what is the matter?" cried Lord Rockforest, in a half-fierce way, while his large dark eyes flashed.

"He's going to faint!" cried Louisa.

Mrs. St. Pierre, massive and rather unwieldy in figure, had not left the carriage, but she looked on in amazement, and her sense of dignity was not a little ruffled at the notion of her being in anywise mixed up in "a scene" on the public road.

"Eustace! what ails you?" half whispered Caroline, in a tone that revealed no small personal annoyance.

"I have had a spasm. It is now passed," said Eustace. "Excuse me, my lord, but this is the first day that I have walked beyond the bounds of my little cottage. But I shall be perfectly well in a moment or two."

The party was all very much surprised. A black cloud lowered over the brow of Lord Rockforest; Louisa appeared grave; and Caroline looked wretched, as she caught a look of peculiar scorn on Mrs. St. Pierre's usually complacent countenance. They proceeded slowly to the cottage; the carriage was ordered to the village inn, and Mrs. St. Pierre, in her decided way, exclaimed,

"We shall sojourn at the inn, Caroline. Nay, we will not, to-day, intrude on Mr. Mildmaye. We only came down from town to see how you are, after your long fatigue in nursing and unusual household cares. Louisa, you can stay now with your sister and cousin. Lord Rockforest

will escort me to the inn, and we shall call down in an hour. Don't get dinner for us. I'll order it now at the inn."

Mrs. St. Pierre was peremptory, and would be obeyed. Away she drove with Lord Rockforest, leaving the Mildmaye girls with their cousin, who had treated them so unexpectedly to such an awkward disappointment at what would otherwise have been an agreeable meeting. Both the girls were much annoyed at the occurrence; and as for Eustace, he looked perfectly miserable.

"What ailed you, Eustace, when you saw Lord Rockforest?" asked Louisa. "You appeared as if you were much frightened. Surely there can be no reason why his presence should be displeasing to you."

"Oh, not in the least. I admire his lordship very much. I am really so sorry. I do not know how to account for it. I felt just as the carriage stopped such a severe and agonising spasm. I suppose that I looked very startled and troubled at it. That was all. Really nothing ailed me but the pain."

His manner falsified his words, and the young clergyman looked as if something else besides physical pain was the matter with him.

"I hope, Eustace," said Caroline, "that the secret which has been weighing on your mind has had nothing to do with this evident feeling of distress."

"A secret!—a secret!" exclaimed Louisa with vehemence, jumping off her chair, and in her turn looking much excited. "What can it be about? Does it concern our family in any way? Is it about Caroline, or me? Or about Mrs. St. Pierre? Or can it concern Lord Rockforest in any way? Tell me at once—tell me, what is it about?"

As she spoke, her beautiful eyes flashed with excitement, and the glow of emotion lightened over her fine face, while she fastened a piercing gaze on the bewildered Eustace, whose lips could be seen to quiver. Apparently overpowered by the vehemence of the appeal to him, Eustace Mildmaye sat silent, the very image of weakness and mental confusion.

Caroline, with a grave and saddened

countenance, approached near him, and said,

“Oh, Eustace! Eustace! in the name of the Most High, what can be the matter with you?”

The force and solemnity of the adjuration seemed to startle Eustace still more. He was evidently under intense nervous excitement; both sisters became really alarmed about him, lest he should fall into a fit. But he made a desperate effort to calm himself, and, lying down at full length on a sofa, he said,

“I shall presently be better. Pray, dear cousins, leave me alone for a few minutes.”

The sisters retired into Caroline's bed-chamber, both of them in great anxiety, and Louisa the very picture of astonishment, not unmingled with fear. Caroline hastened to tell all that she had lately known and surmised about Eustace; about persons having remarked that he seemed to be enduring severe mental trouble; about Doctor Goer's conversation on the state of his mind; about the evident uneasiness of Eustace himself; and, lastly, about Eustace having actually fixed the

very time when the carriage had driven up for telling Caroline the great secret that had weighed upon his mind.

Louisa was greatly astonished at what Caroline revealed to her, and when the latter had concluded, exclaimed,

"I am positive it must be something about Lord Rockforest that he knows. Oh! I hope that it is nothing bad." And Louisa burst suddenly into tears.

Caroline hastened to console her, and said that she had not the least reason to suppose that Lord Rockforest was in any degree concerned in the subject of Eustace's intended revelation; and Caroline did all that a sister could to comfort the weeping Louisa, but she could not help feeling much pain and uneasiness, as Louisa told her that many rumours had lately reached her that Lord Rockforest was an excessively wicked man, and had devoted much of his time and fortune to the pursuits of a libertine. And again Louisa burst out passionately into a flood of tears, and sobbed aloud.

CHAPTER XV.

AND thus for nearly half an hour, in that little bedroom, sat the "rival sisters"—the two beautiful Mildmaye girls, whose graces and charms had made them praised in the great world of fashion, and envied by many of its votaries. Were they to be envied thus? One, with her dejected, bewildered lover lying an invalid in the neighbouring chamber, an object of pity and alarm; and the other fearfully anticipating some dreadful revelation touching the conduct and habits of the nobleman to whom she was engaged. Both of them were suffering so much, that few would have just then changed places with them.

But while they were thus saddened, a

double-knock came to the hall-door of the cottage, and the Mildmayes hastened to prepare for appearing again before Mrs. St. Pierre and Lord Rockforest, for it was they who had walked down from the hotel. Louisa dried her eyes, and endeavoured to remove the signs of her tears. Caroline hastily ran into the parlour, where Eustace was now sitting up, quite restored apparently to calmness. "Yes!" he cried, "I am now quite well enough, dear Caroline, to see Lord Rockforest."

His mentioning the peer's name alone, without that of Mrs. St. Pierre, struck Caroline at the time (and afterwards) as strange.

In came the visitors, and Eustace rose from his seat to receive them, and apologised for his infirmity. He looked tolerably well, but a close observer would have seen that he glanced uneasily towards Lord Rockforest. It was, indeed, a striking contrast. At one side of the room, in an easy-chair, was the pallid, anxious-looking invalid, still seeming as if he could have been glad to steal out of the room, and at the other side was the mus-

cular form of the stalwart Lord Rockforest, with his bold, bluff look, his beetling brow and great thick eyebrows, seated in a cane-chair, that groaned and creaked as it trembled beneath his sturdy figure. Mrs. St. Pierre was seated close to Caroline, on a small sofa, and between them, also, was almost a similarly great contrast. The slim and graceful shape of Caroline, with her pensive and gently-rounded face, so beautifully expressive of soft feminine sensibility, looked almost delicately fragile by the side of the vast matronly figure of Mrs. St. Pierre, arrayed in travelling-dress, and with a costly Indian shawl loosely draped around her figure.

They talked, of course, of Eustace's illness at first, but he was glad to break away from it, and Mrs. St. Pierre was the first to turn the conversation.

"You see, Eustace, that as Lord Rockforest is shortly to be one of our family, he was kind enough to insist on escorting Louisa and myself from town. He was very anxious to hear good news of your health."

"I am sure his lordship is exceedingly

good, and I feel highly honoured by his attention," faintly said the clergyman.

"Honoured! Pooh! nonsense, my dear Mr. Mildmaye, there is no honour in the case whatever. I only regret to see you ill, but I sincerely hope that you will be well enough to perform the happy ceremony between Louisa and myself. She named you at once, and the ladies, I believe, always choose on these occasions."

"Yes, Eustace," continued Mrs. St. Pierre, "at first, Mr. St. Pierre—who of course should be consulted—was very desirous that Lord Rockforest's uncle, the Bishop of Wendover, should be the officiating minister, but Louisa affectionately reminded Mr. St. Pierre of your great kindness to your cousins at the time when their dear father was taken from them, and Lord Rockforest eagerly supported her desire that you should perform the ceremony."

"And I can assure you, Mr. Mildmaye, that I shall be rejoiced if you now give me the assurance that you will marry us at St. George's, Hanover-square. But, dear me, I fear you're going to be ill again."

And Eustace seemed as if he was about to be seized by another spasm, but he recovered himself. The servant then came in with refreshments, sandwiches, and wine upon a tray. Eustace got up from his seat, and tried to bustle about to do the honours of hospitality. Mrs. St. Pierre declined to take refreshments, on the plea that dinner would ere long be served at the hotel. Lord Rockforest, however, took the glass of wine filled out for him by Eustace, and drank to his health. Just then the door opened, and in came Louisa, who did her best to conceal the effects of her recent agitation, but Lord Rockforest could not avoid noticing her inflamed eyes, and said,

“The breeze on the road, Louisa, has inflamed your eyes.”

“Oh, not at all,” laughed Louisa, while she skilfully contrived to keep out of the light as much as possible, and for the moment turning away from the company, she hastened to help herself to some sandwiches.

“I have been just telling Mr. Mildmaye,” continued Lord Rockforest, “that

it was the united wish of you, Louisa, and myself that he should perform the ceremony that is to make us one. I am sure it could not be performed by any one else with such satisfaction to you or myself."

"Certainly not," said Louisa, turning round; "and of course, Eustace, you will gratify us both by uniting us in wedlock before the altar."

Eustace Mildmaye looked confused, and was stammering out something about his health, when the noise of wheels was heard, and a carriage stopped at the gate.

"Who can this be?" cried Mrs. St. Pierre, who, from her seat on the sofa, had a full view of the little flagged pathway between the green gate and the clergyman's hall-door.

In another moment Mrs. St. Pierre's face became excessively grave, and she looked suddenly, with a rather strange expression of countenance, towards Lord Rockforest. The noble lord, at the same time, had his eyes on the nervously-convinced countenance of the clergyman. In the mean while, the servant from the kitchen had seen the carriage draw up at the

gate, and had hastened to the hall-door. Scarcely had a loud resounding knock pealed through the cottage, when the sounds of a strange voice were heard. Mrs. St. Pierre's countenance turned extremely pale; Lord Rockforest started suddenly from his seat; the two Mildmaye girls looked at once confounded and alarmed; Eustace Mildmaye, their cousin, seemed gasping for breath. In an instant the parlour-door was flung wide open, and, attired in a black velvet dress, with drooping sable plumes in her fantastically-shaped bonnet, there stalked into the room the grim, funereal figure of the shunned and dishonoured Lady Rockforest!

There was that in her presence which, at any time and under any circumstances, would have riveted attention. She was considerably beyond the stature of women, and, notwithstanding the sinister and vengeful expression that habitually sat upon her countenance, there was an air of grandeur of mien and of loftiness of character imprinted on her extraordinary face, which still retained many of the peculiar lineaments hereditary in the far-descended

race of Pendarves, from whom she sprang. Her small hands and feet, her aquiline nose, her well-cut mouth, and the outlines of her face, were stamped with the peculiar marks of high blood.

As she entered the room, her face had a singularly gloomy expression ; but when she saw the assembled company before her, she gave a momentary start. The servant at the hall-door had merely told her that visitors were with Mr. Mildmaye, but she had said nothing that could lead Lady Rockforest to suspect who these visitors were. The servant ordinarily in attendance at the cottage had gone away for a couple of hours, and her place was filled by one of the neighbours.

But if her sudden appearance in that place had startled the company in the room, Lady Rockforest herself was equally surprised when she recognised her quondam friend and associate, Mrs. St. Pierre, and when she saw her own son, Lord Rockforest, in the party.

Five years had now elapsed since they had spoken to each other. They had quarrelled ostensibly about money matters,

but really because an entire incompatibility of nature existed between them. The son disliked the parent—the mother hated the child. The peer felt that it was a disadvantage to himself to be the son of one whose name was so bruited in scandalous chronicles, and Lady Rockforest reviled her son as penurious, grasping, and coarsely avaricious. Nor can we conceal the fact that he had behaved in a narrow spirit towards Lady Rockforest with respect to her jointure, of which the payment was often delayed; while in other respects he had thrown obstacles in her way about recovering certain rents legally due to her from some of the under-tenants of certain outlying lands near Dryford. They had a Chancery suit with each other, and for years had never exchanged a word.

If any painter could have got a glimpse of the group assembled in Eustace Mildmaye's sitting-room, he would have had a striking subject for a picture. Almost every face had a different expression stamped on it. Ruffled dignity and surprise were most apparent in the face of Mrs. St. Pierre. Louisa Mildmaye looked

towards Lady Rockforest with a face of contempt, which would have been more marked but for the recollection of the fact that the intruder was the mother of her future husband; her sister Caroline, wearied with attendance on the invalid Eustace, seemed stupified and thunderstruck; and Lord Rockforest had a scowl upon his brow. Eustace Mildmaye could not have looked more ghastly in his coffin. The first person to speak was Lady Rockforest. Though startled at first, she soon recovered her composure.

"Truly," she cried, "it appears to be a very unexpected meeting on all sides. Ah! Mary St. Pierre" (addressing herself to the majestic cousin of the Mildmayes), "it is now a very long time since you and I met face to face in the same room. I do not forget how you were amongst the first to aid Mrs. George Mildmaye, the mother of these penniless young ladies here—these bankrupt's daughters, in tilting at my name. Well, madam, you see it has not thriven with you. Providence, you see, sent Mrs. George Mildmaye to an early grave, and her husband lived long

enough to be a ruined, despicable beggar, and you, Mary St. Pierre, with all your formalism, and your church-going, and your ostentatious alms, and your philanthropic humbug, have been left without a prattling babe of your own to sit upon your knee. Nay, do not look so miserable, Mary St. Pierre, though I feel that you were touched there to the very quick. What good is it to be a mother? There's a pretty son that a woman may be proud of!" And with a scornful and demoniacal laugh, that sounded almost like a yell, she pointed derisively to Lord Rockforest, whose face, while his mother was speaking, had grown to an expression terribly dark and sinister, so much so, that when Louisa chanced to see it, she felt a nervous shudder pass through all her frame. "Yes!" continued Lady Rockforest, "what a dutiful son I have got! Look at him, standing there, mocking at me who gave him his name, and all that he possesses. There is the pitiful creature who litigates my paltry jointure, and cramps my narrow means. There is a nice head for the house of Catesby, who casts public shame and

private anguish on his mother, and goes to wed with a bankrupt's daughter." And in uttering these last words she looked fiercely on Louisa Mildmaye, and continued: "Yes! you are fit for the husband of your choice. You have the very eyes, and mouth, and nose of your hollow, heartless mother, that is now burning in hell-fire as a female fiend deserves."

"Madam!" said Lord Rockforest, in a low voice, heard with dreadful distinctness through the chamber, "stand more by your own order, and do not be thus imprecating vengeance on yourself."

It was as if a serpent had spoken. The words seemed to have been hissed out from between the peer's teeth. The language was, indeed, dreadful, and seemed to sting Lady Rockforest to the heart. Nor was it wonderful, surely, when a son thus addressed the mother that had borne him in such galling speech.

The sensations of the different parties in the room were various in each case. Deeply ruffled dignity was the predominating feeling with Mrs. St. Pierre. Must we record the fact, that, in truth, there was

then lurking in that excellent woman something of a pharisaical feeling that revolted with spiritual pride from any "scene" with Lady Rockforest. Louisa Mildmaye was horrified when she heard her betrothed husband address his own mother in such painful words. A strange sense of evil crept over her, and when Caroline caught the miserable expression of Eustace Mildmaye's face, she was tortured in her heart, and she felt more convinced than ever that there was some fearful secret connected with Lady Rockforest in the possession of the young clergyman.

At first, no one seemed to know what to say or do. With grave face, and a most sinister expression in his features, Lord Rockforest remained silent, though he glanced occasionally at his mother with a flashing eye. The latter was the first to speak.

"Eustace Mildmaye," she cried, addressing herself to the young clergyman, "it was to see *you* that I had come here. I heard that your future bride was staying with you, to nurse you after your illness. Little did I suppose that on entering

your house I should meet with one of the oldest of my surviving enemies" (and she glanced towards Mrs. St. Pierre); "and little did I think that I should have to encounter here the presence of that wretch who insults me in the grossest way."

"Come, madam," said Lord Rockforest, "you had better choose some other place for your displays. If you will not respect the ladies before you, at least you ought to recollect that an invalid recovering from long illness should not be exposed to such disturbance."

"The house, sir, does not belong to you, that you should give directions in it, or take such an air of authority. I came to see my friend Mr. Mildmaye; to ask after his health, and to talk to him on some parochial business."

Lord Rockforest was again going to say something harsh to his mother, when the clergyman rose, and looking towards him with a beseeching expression, seemed to deprecate any further war of words.

"Ay!" said Lady Rockforest, "lecture him, Mr. Mildmaye. You know that I have told you what sort of a character he

is. There he stands, and for everything that he has he is indebted to me."

"As you have painted my character, madam, for the edification of Mr. Mildmaye, it might be, perhaps, only fair that I should ask Mr. Mildmaye what he thinks of your ladyship," again sneered Lord Rockforest; while both Mrs. St. Pierre and the Mildmaye sisters were again shocked to see how distorted the peer's countenance became with passion.

Suddenly bursting forth with frenzied vehemence, Lady Rockforest screamed out,

"Mr. Mildmaye had better take care what he says of me. I have always treated him as a friend, and paid him every respect due to his station. Mark! young man," she continued, as she strode over and placed her lean and skinny hand upon the shoulder of Eustace, "I charge you to have a care what you say of me! If you play me false in any manner, by the Heaven over our heads, and by the Hell which traitors deserve, I would come out of my grave to torment you. Have a care, sir, what you say of me. You have en-

joyed much of my confidence, and if I find that you ever abuse your privileges, my dying curses—ay! the curses of a cruelly treated and most injured woman—would blast you into misery. Ay! you well may shudder. Play false to me, Mr. Priest, and I'll persecute your very soul." And, as she uttered these threats, she drew herself up to her full height, and, shaking the forefinger of her right hand in the most menacing manner at Eustace, she looked a terrible impersonation of evil, and one might have fancied her as inspired by some unearthly and demoniacal impulse.

Mrs. St. Pierre turned her eyes towards Eustace, feeling much astonished at the nature of the address poured out by Lady Rockforest, when she was alarmed at seeing the clergyman cast back into a faint, and lose his entire consciousness. He had been seen, also, by Louisa Mildmaye to quail beneath the threatening language that had just been uttered.

"Let the room, my lord, be cleared at once," cried Mrs. St. Pierre, as she rose

from her seat, and went over to assist Caroline in ministering to the invalid.

"Not cleared, Mary St. Pierre," said Lady Rockforest, "until I utter my hearty curse and malediction on this hateful marriage between my wicked son and the bankrupt's daughter. May it end in misery; and, if they have offspring, may they be as great curses to them as mine is to me!" And with this malevolent apostrophe she stalked out of the room, and strode across the little garden to her carriage.

Means were applied to restore Eustace to consciousness, and by the advice of Mrs. St. Pierre the physician was sent for without delay. The young clergyman was removed into his bedroom with as little delay as possible. He seemed in great mental pain, and utterly exhausted in his body.

When Doctor Goer arrived, and had examined Eustace, his face looked very grave, though in general he was noted for a cheerful manner in dealing with his patients. In answer to the anxious in-

quiries of the family, he said at once that there was much danger of a severe fit to be apprehended, and that great care should be taken to keep Eustace free from all excitement of the brain, until he was perfectly restored to health; and the doctor also spoke in rather a desponding tone upon the general character of the constitution of his patient, and intimated that he feared his life, even if prolonged, would always be very delicate.

This news naturally gave much pain to Mrs. St. Pierre, and to the Mildmaye sisters. After Doctor Goer had retired there was some deliberation as to what should be done. Mrs. St. Pierre was averse to Caroline being allowed to remain in attendance on Eustace; and Louisa Mildmaye also shared in the opinions of Mrs. St. Pierre. But the next day, unluckily, was appointed for a meeting at Mr. St. Pierre's, in Portman-square, between the attorney of Mr. St. Pierre and the solicitor of Lord Rockforest, in reference to the marriage settlement on the approaching occasion. Louisa would have gladly remained the night with her sister,

but Mr. St. Pierre was far from being robust, and it would not answer to disquiet him. The meeting was arranged for specially, and could not be avoided.

Under all the circumstances, after debating all the eventualities, it was thought wisest by Mrs. St. Pierre that Caroline Mildmaye should continue to remain at the cottage for two days more, and it was arranged that on the third day from that on which they were then assembled, both Mrs. St. Pierre and Louisa Mildmaye should come down from town to see the state of the patient, and to deliberate with Caroline on the state of affairs. And with that distinct understanding Mrs. St. Pierre and Lord Rockforest returned to the hotel, and some time afterwards they took up Louisa for the return to London. The housekeeper of Mrs. St. Pierre returned also with them to town, and her place in attendance on Eustace was occupied by Nurse Johnson from Dryford.

CHAPTER XVI.

AFTER Caroline on that evening had kissed her sister Louisa, and heard the carriage roll away in the direction of town, she felt, naturally, a great depression of spirits. Tears came unbidden into her eyes, and she had a sad presentiment of evil. She had been shocked by the sudden appearance of Lady Rockforest; the truth, also, must be told, that she was horrified with the savage expression that had been visible on the face of Lord Rockforest, and the grossly disrespectful manner which he had assumed towards his unfortunate mother had also pained Caroline deeply. But besides these causes for displeasure, there was another that

pressed on Caroline still more. This was the painful mode in which Eustace Mildmaye had exposed himself, and the extraordinary way in which he had been addressed by Lady Rockforest.

Caroline made all allowances for the weakness of an invalid. But still it seemed to her that there was evidently something horrible pressing on the mind of her cousin Eustace, and the words of Lady Rockforest confirmed it. What could this mysterious secret be? She had heard Eustace himself acknowledge that he had a secret in his possession. He had promised to reveal it to her. He was actually doing so when the carriage containing Mrs. St. Pierre, Lord Rockforest, and her betrothed sister had driven up. Was it not most extraordinary, also, that on this very day, when these visitors had come from London to see Eustace, Lady Rockforest should have intruded on their company, and disturbed them with her haggard presence and her hateful imprecations?

The more she reflected on it, the more firmly was Caroline Mildmaye convinced that some mystery respecting Lord

Rockforest, the engaged of her sister Louisa, was on the mind of her cousin Eustace. If the secret merely concerned Lady Rockforest, why should Eustace have been so disturbed at the sight of Lord Rockforest? The significant words, also, that had been uttered by Lady Rockforest to Eustace Mildmaye, suggested many reflections to Caroline.

In the evening, after the sun had gone down, and after she had seen that Eustace had been left for a while to repose undisturbed, Caroline, melancholy and solitary, cast herself into an easy-chair in the parlour. She sighed heavily as she thought of her state, and she drew a vivid contrast between her own position and that of her beloved sister. Louisa had made up her mind "for better or worse, through sickness and sorrow," to cleave to Lord Rockforest. He was rich, of a high family, and the connexion was a good one in many respects for those who, like the Mildmayes, had been received in the world, and were mainly dependant for their position in society upon their purse-proud relations. Yet Caroline would never

have accepted Lord Rockforest for a husband. She did not like his personal appearance. She was prejudiced, also, by various ill rumours that had reached her, about the personal character of Lord Rockforest, and she brooded in pain at the retrospect of that portion of the lives of Louisa and herself which had passed since the death of her lamented father.

On that evening Eustace whispered to her, "Caroline, you shall know all to-morrow, but if this were to be the last night of my life, recollect this, that whatever happens, this marriage between Louisa and Lord Rockforest must on no account take place"—and the invalid said this with some indications of strength of purpose. The manner of them, more than the words themselves, surprised Caroline, and increased her anxiety still more to learn the whole of the revelations which Eustace promised to disclose. All that night she tossed to and fro on her couch, unable to rest, and with her mind tormented by anxieties of various kinds. She at times regretted that she had ever entangled herself in any kind, even of con-

ditional engagement of future matrimony with her cousin, and she appeared at the breakfast-table on the next morning haggard and unrefreshed.

At last breakfast was over, and the moment was now come when Caroline hoped that her curiosity and anxiety would be relieved. Doctor Goer was not to visit until the middle of the day, as he was summoned on a pressing case in a distant locality.

"Sit here, Caroline," cried Eustace, motioning to his cousin to occupy a seat beside him on the sofa. Caroline complied, but in doing so could not help regarding the solemn aspect of the young clergyman's face. But she attributed it to the effects of illness not yet quite passed away.

"I have to relate to you, Caroline, a very long story, and one in which I myself am most curiously involved. It deeply concerns us all, for surely the happiness of our dearest Louisa ought to be a momentous subject, and what I have to tell you relates very much to her ; and seldom is it given to any man to have been placed

in a more difficult dilemma than that in which I have been cast." And Eustace uttered a deep groan.

Caroline was so irritated with prolonged anxiety, that she looked at Eustace with something of contempt, and cried out,

"Oh, Eustace, you have really been trifling with me too long, and I cannot bear suspense any more. I pray of you not to tell me any long story, and I entreat of you to relieve my mind, and your own, in the fewest words that are possible. Tell me at once whatever dreadful secret it concerns me to know."

"But I am not yet quite assured that it is at all right that I should divulge it. The characters of various persons may be involved in it."

"Oh, Eustace, away with this miserable, this pitiful inconsistency. Oh! tell me at once what it is about. There is now not a soul but ourselves in the house. Doctor Goer will not be here for a couple of hours, and I have sent the maid to the other end of the village. Nurse Johnson asked permission to be absent for an hour to see her daughter, who was confined last night.

Now is the time when you can speak without disturbance. Tell me what this secret is, and you can relate to me the particulars at some other time."

Eustace's gaze was attracted to the fleecy clouds, wafted by a gentle breeze across the sky. He continued to look as if to Heaven for help, while he commenced to unburden himself of the secret. Caroline, with pale face, and countenance which told of more than one of the restless nights she had recently passed, fixed her fine dark eyes, that were then suffused with the tears of tenderness, on her invalid cousin, who again began :

"Yes! my dearest cousin, I feel at last nerved to the occasion, and my sense of duty compels me to reveal the facts which must peremptorily prevent the marriage of Louisa with Lord Rock——"

The noise of the wicket-gate that led from the road across the clergyman's little garden interrupted him. In another instant the window was darkened by a large figure that crossed it, and at the next moment two portentous knocks were heard at the hall-door. How they sounded

through the cottage ! As Caroline heard them, and gazed on the trembling, shuddering form of Eustace Mildmaye, she felt as if each knock was the stroke of fate. She rushed at once to the window to see who it was that thus frightened Eustace Mildmaye so terribly, and she fully expected that it was another visitation from the much dreaded Lady Rockforest. But Caroline saw at a glance that another figure, and a female one, was in the place of the peeress.

There was a pause for some time, and observing the consternation of Eustace, Caroline hesitated for a moment. But in the excitement of the instant, feeling herself nerved to desperation, she rushed from the room into the hall, and just as she was going to open the door, three more loud knocks, and a pull of the bell were given, and Caroline felt her heart beating as, resolved to confront any danger that threatened, she opened the door.

The face which met hers on opening the door, when seen in those circumstances, would have been enough to startle a person of stout nerves. It was not that of

Lady Rockforest, and had none of the redeeming qualities which were stamped on the face of the peeress. There was "a low-browed baseness" imprinted on the stern and repulsive visage that confronted Caroline Mildmaye. The great black eyes were livid with a sinister expression; they were overshadowed with bushy eyebrows that aided in giving the countenance the expression of force of will; the cheeks were sallow, with an appearance of a lurid smile flitting to and fro around a long mouth furnished with sharp white teeth, and over all the features, and over the whole face, there reigned a malignity of aspect that was calculated to awaken feelings of dread, and of foreboding of the consequences that might happen from intercourse with a person of such aspect. The broad figure, and the dark dress in which the stranger was enveloped, added to the effect produced by her presence.

"Is the Reverend Eustace Mildmaye at home?" said the stranger.

"He is at home," said Caroline, with assumed firmness, though her heart pal-

pitated, "but he cannot see strangers now. He is unwell."

"Oh! I am no stranger to him," said the woman; "he will see me, I am sure. Ah! there he is at the window, looking like a ghost. I shall use no further ceremony." And she pushed into the hall with something like rudeness, and in another minute opened the door of the parlour.

Pale, miserable, and frightened in appearance, Eustace looked towards the stranger, and exclaimed in a tone of fear mingled with surprise, "Mrs. Ullathorne!"

"Ah, hah! Mr. Parson," said that person, "you did not expect a visit from me. I just came to remind you of certain little facts, which you, perhaps, have forgotten. Oh, ho! how the poor little fellow shakes! A hunted hare would have more spirit than you. Why you are not fit to be a martyr! And so this, Miss Mildmaye, is to be the husband that you have chosen?"

"Mrs. Ullathorne, I request that you will——"

"Silence that gibbering tongue of yours,

you chattering clerical idiot!" cried Mrs. Ullathorne. "I came here for no idle purpose." And she turned round and shut the door fast, after first looking up and down the passage from the hall-door to see whether any eavesdroppers were within earshot. She then went to the window and pulled down the blind, and seizing the left arm of Caroline violently, she dragged her, as a life-guardsmen would pull a child, across the room, and addressing herself to the cowed Eustace Mildmaye, exclaimed, "Now, mark my words, young Mildmaye. Listen to this"—and she swore a hideous oath too terrible to be repeated,—"if you betray the confidence that has been reposed in you, I will not say whether your life shall be shortened or not; but if the Devil himself were to start up from hell to prevent me, I'll make *her* miserable while there's breath in her body"—(and she shook Caroline Mildmaye as she spoke);—"and if a single word of what has passed at Catesby Court be revealed by you to her, or by her to any one else, I'd drown her myself in the Poacher's Hole with these hands, and bury both you

and her together where your bones would never be discovered."

Worse even than her language was the fiendish malignity with which Mrs. Ullathorne uttered these words. They made the heart of Caroline Mildmaye quail, and she could see Eustace trembling under their effect. He seemed to gasp for breath, and after having risen from his seat, tottered back into it. A strange wild look was visible in his eyes.

"Mark what I say!" cried Mrs. Ullathorne, in a loud voice. And with a steady, malignant gaze, after glancing for a moment or two at the cousins, she retired out of the room, and walked rapidly across the garden.

Almost stunned with the suddenness of the apparition of this ferocious personage, Caroline Mildmaye at first had no heart for words. Her spirit had shrunk, her breath had been taken away from her. Yet in justice to Caroline, we must record that it was not any fear about herself, or craven terror about any possible danger, that affected her mind so much. It was the sight of the horror produced on Eu-

stace that amazed her, and chilled her heart with dread.

"Eustace, Eustace!" she at length cried, "what does all this mean? Tell me, I pray you, and relieve the agony of my apprehensions."

"No marriage—no marriage," said Eustace, distractedly—"Louisa must not marry him; but leave me—for a moment. I am very ill. Nay! nay! leave me to myself. I shall lie down to repose." And with feeble steps the young clergyman tottered to the door, and after saying that in an hour he would appear again, he retired to his apartment.

Caroline was utterly confounded at what had passed. Nor is it too much to say that the love she sincerely felt for Eustace had begun to be shaken. She saw that in his case either there must be some strange moral weakness, approaching to what is contemptible, or some great secret offence of a criminal character. For the words that she had heard from Mrs. Ullathorne seemed plainly to point to a great secret, affecting the criminality of some one else? What could it be?

Might it possibly refer to the outrage on the remains of Caroline's mother, that mystery which, up to that day, had still remained in the dark, in spite of the efforts to discover the violators of her grave? And poor Caroline shuddered as she thought that Eustace was cognisant of some secret about it, which he ought to have revealed. But in any case why should Eustace be so weak, so vacillating—and Caroline was almost afraid to think, so *cowardly*—as he seemed to have shown himself in his partial revelations, and his contradictory conduct? And Caroline, without solving any of the enigmas presented by her cousin's strange conduct, burst into tears and wept deeply, for the truth must be told, that her affections were severely tried, and she had begun to lose respect for one to whom she had looked up in other days with feelings of strong regard.

While she was still weeping, she thought that her ear caught a sound similar to that of a bell-pull being shaken without the bell being rung. A faint and feeble noise of a bell ever so slightly touched came upon her ear, and she got up hastily and

wiped her streaming eyes. She passed into the hall, and walked across the passage and into a lobby, up two or three steps to the place where the sleeping apartment of Eustace was situated, and in doing so she saw the bell-wire leading from his room towards the kitchen in motion, as if it had just recently been pulled. The servant had not yet returned, and Caroline approached the door of Eustace, and knocked.

She was answered only by a faint and inarticulate sort of groaning. Excited greatly by what she had gone through that morning, she was just then roused to a state bordering on desperation. She opened the clergyman's door rapidly, and was soon horror-struck at what she beheld.

Eustace Mildmay, with his hand still upon the bell-rope, had fallen between his bed, and the fireplace of his apartment. His face was perfectly colourless, and the white of his eyes alone was visible. The light shone in clear upon his ghastly countenance, and revealed in an instant to Caroline the mouth of the young clergyman drawn up to one side, and the facial muscles horribly distorted. He was making

strange sounds, as if he wished to speak, but nothing could be caught of what he desired to say.

Poor Caroline was alone in the cottage, and her sensations at that moment were perfectly agonising. Brought up in luxury, she had not been early accustomed to the sight of pain, and to moments of trial. The anguish of the world had been known to her only by report. After her father died, in the time while she and Louisa resided in that village, they were at once too poor and too proud (it must be confessed) to attempt the office of district-visitors, where the sight of suffering, without having the means of relieving it, would at once have tortured their susceptible and rather too sentimental dispositions. We have already recorded how much it was to be regretted that their minds had not been carefully formed under the superintendence of a pious mother, and even during their sojourn at Mrs. St. Pierre's the religionism and vast machinery of active humanitarianism which they had seen at Belvyddyr, and in her town mansion in Portman-square, were of an-

other kind of sentimentalism. Vicarious beneficence, in one shape or another, was the key to Mrs. St. Pierre's well-intentioned plan of systematic charity.

But character is best roused into moral life, and steeled to the endurance of corroding cares and to fortitude, under the personal agony of sharp afflictions by one's own immediate trials. The Mildmayes, as compared with others, had fallen upon a life of roses until recently, and the charming softness of Caroline, and the brilliant vivacity and airy lightness of the keen and aspiring Louisa, were ill-suited for the hours when Providence ordains to try the creature to the very core, and to make the heart quiver beneath the pangs of misery.

You would, indeed, have pitied poor Caroline if you could have beheld her look of horror as she saw the state of Eustace Mildmaye. She rushed towards him, and endeavoured to raise him. He was helpless, and had been so wasted by his illness, that it was no great effort to lift him from the floor, yet Caroline also had become weaker lately, and but for the excite-

ment under which she laboured, it is possible that she might not have been able to place the young clergyman in an upright position. The sense of her loneliness at the moment was additional pain to her. She threw the window open, she hurriedly seized a bottle of *sal volatile* on the toilet-table, and sprinkled some of it over his distorted face. She unloosed his neckerchief, and in her excitement she pulled the bedroom bell violently, forgetting there was none to hear.

She resolved to run to the next house for assistance, but fortunately relief came to her. The servant and the nurse both returned, and additional help was given her.

"Poor gentleman! A terrible stroke of the paralytic," were the words of Nurse Johnson on seeing Eustace; and in the absence of Doctor Goer the village apothecary was sent for, and he used whatever remedies he could. He took a very bad view of the case, and at a later period of the day Doctor Goer corroborated his opinion.

"It is impossible," said Doctor Goer, "to say how many years poor Mr. Mildmaye

may live. He may possibly completely recover his speech and his senses, but after such a stroke as that, he must be always greatly debilitated. It is a very bad case, and I fear that the Faculty can do but little in it. There is a strong point against him in the fact of his mother's family having had cerebral disease in their family for generations."

Sad was the task of the miserable Caroline in writing of what had occurred to Mrs. St. Pierre. She preferred addressing the sad news to her rather than sending it, in the first instance, to Louisa, so occupied with the various preparations of her approaching wedding.

Scalding were the tears that coursed down Caroline's cheeks, as she thought how, only on the day before, Lord Rockforest had solicited Eustace to officiate at his marriage, and now what was the state of Eustace! Possibly he might not be alive in a month hence, at the time appointed for the wedding. And then much of her waning affection for Eustace returned into the tender and womanly heart of Caroline, and she sobbed as if her heart

would break, and she accused herself of having been unjust to him, and of having forgotten his old kindness; and her self-accusations were very severe, for, as we have fairly told, she had gone far in her affections towards Eustace when she had refused the hands of Lord Rockforest and Sir Vaughan Gwynne.

Doctor Goer had prevailed on her to consent to take rest that night, and there was a superabundance of attention paid from some of the neighbouring families when it flew about that the village pastor had been so struck down. But exhausted by two previous nights of sleeplessness, Caroline begged that she might be left as much as possible to herself, while she consented to lie down in the evening.

Drawing a shawl round her person, weak in body, and sad at heart, Caroline, as dusk approached, reclined in an easy-chair near the rear window in the parlour. It was a room with a double front: one window looked out on a small grass-plot and across the high-road, while the other was a practicable window, and opened on a garden and small shrubbery at the back

of the cottage. It was near the latter one that Caroline reposed, and the view outside from the window was in gloomy accordance with the state of her mind. The shrubs looked dark and dismally solemn, as they bent to and fro under a gale of wind, which rose higher every hour. She could trace their forms in the outlines against the sky, when the moon shone out at intervals, and the wind on that night appeared to her to whistle with melancholy cadence through the trees; but the feeling, doubtless, was to be attributed to her excited fancy and her wearied nerves. Exhaustion, however, will have its way, and she sank into an uneasy slumber, in which confused noises and strange figures harassed her mind; and in an hour she started from a dream, in which she thought that she was present at the nuptials of her sister Louisa with Lord Rockforest, when her cousin Eustace rushed in violently to prevent the marriage.

"What's that?" cried Caroline, as she started up. "I fancied that there was some person looking in on me from the window, and that I saw a dark form

moving amongst the trees. Yes! there it is again. Who is in the shrubbery at this time of the night? No! no! 'twas but the shadow of the cypress in the moonlight. Fool that I am!"

The servant then came in with a cup of tea to Caroline, and said that particular directions had been given by the doctor that Mr. Mildmayer should not be disturbed for three hours more; and had left word that Miss Mildmayer might continue to rest herself, as he (the doctor) would not return till eleven o'clock. Jaded as Caroline was, and feeling her exhaustion more even after her brief slumber, from which she had been hastily awaked, she was glad to lie down again; and, wearied out with fatigue, she again dropped into a heavy sleep, her last sentiments being those of eager desire that either Mrs. St. Pierre or Louisa were with her, and hoping that the next day would bring both of them.

And the next morning came, and Mrs. St. Pierre with Louisa drove off from Portman-square, in a barouche and four, for Dryford. Passing down St. James's-

street, they were rather surprised by seeing Henry Wilmot talking in the gravest manner with Sir Vaughan Gwynne. Both gentlemen were extremely serious, and no sooner did Sir Vaughan Gwynne recognise them, than he made an impetuous gesture to stop. He was at the side of the carriage in a moment.

"Dear me!" cried he; "Wilmot and I were just going up to visit you on an important affair, Mrs. St. Pierre. I trust that you are not going out of town for any time?"

"Oh dear no; Louisa and I shall be at home late to-night. We were only going to visit poor Eustace Mildmaye, who is still very ill."

"And could you see us early to-morrow?" said Wilmot; "for I fear that I shall have to leave town to-morrow afternoon."

"Oh! certainly," said Mrs. St. Pierre. "You can call on me at eleven to-morrow morning."

The two gentlemen eagerly agreed to the proposal, and, after some interchange of passing polite inquiries, the carriage proceeded on its way, both the occupants

remarking how very serious Sir Vaughan had looked, and Louisa feeling that Wilmot had most particularly directed his eye towards herself. The day was fine after a stormy night, the horses were good, and the road was smooth, and after a pleasant ride of four hours they reached Dryford.

Greatly astonished was Mrs. St. Pierre to observe the crowd about the cottage of the clergyman, and she guessed that the last was over, and that Eustace was no more. But there was a strange something on the faces of that crowd, that at once startled both Mrs. St. Pierre and Louisa. One might have supposed that consternation more than sorrow was stamped upon their faces. Doctor Goer and his wife, and his wife's sister, were there. So also was Mr. Denham of Denham Park; and a brother of Lord Latimer's; and a half-pay officer, whose name was forgotten by, but whose person was familiar to, Louisa. Several of the notabilities of the village were there, and many females of the lower classes were talking rapidly together.

"Louisa, dearest," cried Mrs. St. Pierre, "prepare yourself for the worst; poor Eustace is with us no more!"

Amidst dead silence they descended from the carriage, and were handed by Mr. Denham and Doctor Goer into the parlour. The faces of both gentlemen were unusually solemn. Mrs. Goer came in after them.

"Where is Caroline? How is my cousin?" cried Louisa, in a low tone, tremulous with emotion, for Louisa really felt much affection for Eustace. But as she said the word "Caroline," Mrs. Goer buried her face in her kerchief, and sobbed aloud, and each of the gentlemen looked to the other, waiting to see who was to reveal the terrible and unexpected tidings.

Caroline Mildmaye was nowhere to be found!

What had become of her no one knew. The last who had seen her was the nurse, who, not long after the refreshment of tea had been given to Caroline, had stolen in, about nine o'clock, to see whether she was awake, in order to ask some question of domestic details. But Caroline was fast

asleep, at that time in a deep slumber, and Nurse Johnson did not wake her, but left her so. Two hours afterwards Doctor Goer called to see his patient, and the servant had entered the parlour to call Caroline—and no sign of her was in the room. She then went to her sleeping apartment, but neither was Caroline to be found there, nor in the small store-room, where, from house-keeping duties, she had occasionally sat. No trace of her could be found anywhere, and every place was searched, and even houses in the village were sent to, on the notion that she might have gone out for some special purpose of business. But neither during all the night, nor in the morning, nor up to the arrival of Mrs. St. Pierre and Louisa, could any tidings be found about the missing Caroline.

Horror was painted on the faces of the two travellers as they heard this astounding news. They knew not what to make of it—neither did any one else. Nor on the communication of such intelligence were they so much concerned at knowing that Eustace was hopelessly ill—and that he might not have many days to live.

Their thoughts, as was naturally to be expected, ran entirely on Caroline; and in an agony of doubt, dismay, and dreadful apprehension, they begged to be left alone for consultation; and as they went into the room of Caroline, and saw all her clothes folded up with her characteristic neatness, and her bonnet and cloak hung upon a nail, and her prayer-book open on the dressing-table, they both of them burst into a flood of tears; while Mrs. St. Pierre threw herself upon her knees, and, with bowed head and humbled heart, prayed aloud to Heaven for its aid.

Neither of them at that time knew of the visit of Mrs. Ullathorne to the cottage. If they had, their subsequent conduct, and that of their advisers, might have been of a different nature from the course followed by them.

CHAPTER XVII.

THAT Caroline Mildmaye must have been taken away by some violent means was almost evident at a glance. The grass-garden behind the cottage had the marks of being heavily trodden on, and on the wooden paling that screened it from the neighbouring retired road, there was the appearance of a portion of it having been slightly bent down, as if a person had been dragged over it. Beyond that there was no evidence from which particular induction could be made. That she was removed, however, by force, in some manner or other, was the opinion of all the persons in the village.

The eyes of Mrs. St. Pierre and Louisa often met each other, while the people

grouped around them were talking and displaying their garrulity. Neither of them, in presence of the crowd, said a word of their suspicions. Mrs. St. Pierre was the first, however, to desire that Miss Louisa Mildmaye and herself should be left by themselves for a few minutes. Scarcely had the door closed on them, when they exclaimed almost simultaneously,

“Lady Rockforest! Lady Rockforest!”

And as they thought of what sort of character Lady Rockforest was represented to be, and as they recollected her vindictive countenance, they were greatly alarmed for the consequences.

It was not unnatural that they should have suspected Lady Rockforest. Her fierce appearance on the occasion of her sudden intrusion into the cottage, as previously told, and her threatening language towards Eustace, coupled with her bitter allusions to the daughters of the bankrupt husband of her ancient enemy, the late Mrs. George Mildmaye, were of themselves sufficient to raise the grave suspicion. Mrs. St. Pierre was breaking forth into a vehement tirade against Lady Rockforest, when

she was suddenly startled by the expression of Louisa's face.

"Oh! for Heaven's sake, let us be cautious," cried Louisa; "there is something most awful in this case. There is, I am sure, a most terrible secret that concerns us all. Oh! God preserve us!"

And then, for the first time, Mrs. St. Pierre heard from the lips of Louisa an account of Caroline's disclosure to her on the occasion of their previous visit. On hearing it, she was of course convinced that Lady Rockforest, beyond doubt, must be concerned in the abduction of Caroline. Yet on consideration she felt, along with Louisa, that as the secret alluded to possibly seriously concerned living parties, there was necessity for the greatest caution; and it was only then, on the occasion of Eustace's name having been mentioned, that either of them thought it worth while to ask more particularly for the health of the young clergyman, so powerful was the sensation caused to them by the news of Caroline's disappearance.

They were told by Doctor Goer that Eustace might drag on his life for an in-

definite period, but that it was very improbable that he would ever recover his intellect, and that his speech would always be seriously affected. The sight of Eustace terribly shocked Louisa; the awful change in his appearance completely overpowered her. His agitated expression of countenance touched her feelings; and no longer mistress of herself, she was unable, even in the presence of the invalid, to restrain her tears, though the warning looks of Mrs. St. Pierre told her how necessary it was for her to try and suppress her emotions. And yet, as Eustace again and again tried to speak, and looked so tenderly towards Louisa, it was hardly possible to avoid being agonised.

And still more touching was it to the feelings of them both as he made signals with his hand, and looked anxiously towards the door, as if he expected to see Caroline; and when his feeble lips made a gurgling noise, as with difficulty he enunciated a sound like "*kar, kar,*" even Mrs. St. Pierre herself, with all her experience of trials and sickness, was compelled to turn away her face, in order to hide the

sight of her emotions from the trembling and apparently death-stricken invalid.

Mrs. St. Pierre, from familiarity with affairs, from the habit of ruling over large establishments (and she liked to interfere actively in all the departments of her great household), had acquired much energy of character, sustained also by vigour of constitution. She observed from out of the window the gathering crowd, and saw carriages of the neighbouring gentry arriving, filled with various members of their families most anxious to make inquiries about the missing Miss Mildmaye, for the news had spread with the marvellous speed by which strange tidings are often borne. She disliked "scenes," and yet she saw that the "hue and cry" of a talkative neighbourhood would be raised, not only about Miss Mildmaye, but also about "the secret," which might possibly have got wind already through some indiscretion of the young clergyman.

In this state of matters she decided to act resolutely and promptly. She again requested that Louisa should be left with her for a few minutes' strictly private con-

versation. With clear decision, and in the fewest words, she communicated her intentions.

"Yes, Louisa, the matter, if possible, must be smothered up, though it will be extremely difficult. I see Mrs. Denham of Denham Park just come up to inquire. I shall take her excellent husband at once into my confidence, and use his great local personal influence in order to aid us in trying to have as little commotion as possible made about this extraordinary affair. With a few confidential words to him and Doctor Goer, on whom we can thoroughly rely, we shall be able to get through the difficulty of wresting Caroline from Lady Rockforest, for I have no doubt that in a half-mad fit she has taken her to Catesby Court. You can remain at Dryford, and stay with Mrs. Denham at Denham Park, but I must return to Mr. St. Pierre. I shall come down again to-morrow and see what steps shall be taken, if we do not hear news before that time."

Louisa, by experience, knew too much of Mrs. St. Pierre to think of opposing her determination. She disliked, indeed, hav-

ing to go to Mrs. Denham's (a cold and superciliously condescending personage); but so Mrs. St. Pierre willed it. In two or three minutes more Mrs. Denham was in the cottage, and of course she was profuse in attentions to Louisa Mildmaye, as Mrs. St. Pierre explained (as far as she allowed herself) her intentions and her wish to see Mr. Denham—that all-important and yet excellent country gentleman, “the prime minister of ten miles round,” as poor Louisa had once playfully called him at a happier moment.

Mr. Denham was summoned from the local bench of magistrates, over whom he presided with no ordinary ability. Calm, courteous, and kindly in his acts, with a fine grave magisterial countenance, Mr. Denham passed for more than he was really worth. His talents were but mediocre, though he fancied himself a Walpole in practical ability, and a Talleyrand in social diplomacy. He at once entered into the feelings of Mrs. Denham; and the moment that he heard that there was “a secret” in the case, he looked solemn and mysterious, and having a great horror of

"exposures," he at once fell into the wishes of Mrs. St. Pierre about the propriety of keeping matters "as quiet as possible." He was complimented at his assistance having been invoked by a lady of the rank and consequence of Mrs. St. Pierre of Belvyddyr.

When Mr. Denham heard that it was likely that Caroline was secreted at Catesby Court, he was at first very much surprised, but he was afterwards pleased, as he thought what an admirable opportunity presented itself for the exercise of his diplomatic talents.

"My dear madam," he cried, "we cannot be too circumspect in this most important and intensely critical affair. I am so rejoiced that you communicated with me at once. I flatter myself that my magisterial experience and my knowledge of the world will be most useful to you. Nay, madam—nay, I beg of you—a Denham of Denham Park must feel for a St. Pierre and a Mildmaye. Both of the families represented in your person are too long connected with this shire for any of its gentry to be indifferent to their interests."

It was certainly easier to talk of hushing up such an affair than to succeed in doing so. Village gossip is proverbially talkative, and strange events fast get wind in districts undistracted by commercial activity. Nevertheless, there was some hope that if Caroline could be soon recovered from whoever took her away, matters would not be much talked about. Doctor Goer was an invaluable counsellor and assistant on such an occasion. He shook his head professionally, and was perfect master of all the external plausibilities of a physician, while behind these acquired accomplishments was the presence of a sensible and manly understanding, joined to a kindly disposition.

“We must,” he said, while talking with these groups outside the cottage, “not be too curious in probing these matters. Ahem! ahem! Private matters in families—ahem!—you understand—they should not be ripped up—at least, precipitately—ahem! yes! as I said, precipitately. All will be explained in good time—satisfactorily—yes! quite so—I said, satisfactorily—and from what I have heard, Miss Caro-

line Mildmaye is—yes!—all right—you know—yes! exactly so—all right—most respectable family—a young lady who is an ornament to it—yes! a young lady whom I so much respect—mere temporary absence—just wait till to-morrow, and—the less talk about private matters, always the better, you know.”

Yet, in spite of all that Doctor Goer could say, people in the village thought it very queer; and there was much private conjecture uttered on the occasion that we need not here repeat. In the mean time, the party at Eustace's cottage discussed the arrangements that should be made at once. Louisa was to pass the night at Denham Park, and stay there until Caroline was found; and Mr. Denham was to repair to Catesby Court, to seek an interview with Lady Rockforest, and try and get tidings of the missing Caroline. Mr. Denham had a small fishing-lodge, which, in his former days, he had used when a young man, and which was still tenanted by one of his old servants. It was called Topcliffe Cottage, and it lay about five miles to the north of Catesby Court. Den-

ham Park, lying in an opposite direction, at the western side of the village of Dryford, was fully seventeen miles from Catesby Court. The evening was then fast approaching, and Mr. Denham decided on passing the night at the fishing-cottage, as he feared that he might have considerable difficulties in obtaining an interview with Lady Rockforest ; and " I should so like," he said, " to have a close search through that old house by daylight, in case I ascertained that Miss Caroline was concealed there." He was to meet Mrs. St. Pierre on the next day at noon, and with much flutter on both sides they parted for the day.

Louisa, tortured in her heart, still hoped that before the night had far gone Caroline might be found. Over and over again she changed her mind, and blamed both herself and Mrs. St. Pierre for not raising a louder alarm in the country. Then she would revert to the difficulties of the case, the disagreeable effects of the whole public mind being concentrated on their family, and the malicious construction which, perhaps, would be put upon it

by lovers of scandal. Sometimes she pictured to herself the sight of Caroline in peril; and sometimes, in her excited, nervous state, she fancied that she heard her sister's voice, and more than once rose off her chair, and cried, "Oh! there she is; thank God!" And then she would become hysterical, and want to go out and seek her, and the family at Denham Park had much difficulty in restraining her. The pompous and supercilious Mrs. Denham would address her condescendingly, in a way that made the pride of Louisa wince.

"Calm — yourself — Miss Mildmaye — calm yourself. Recollect that the long parliamentary experience and the great magisterial knowledge of Mr. Denham are all engaged in your service. If he cannot be of assistance, you may depend upon it that 'twill be very difficult for you to find counsel to aid you; and again I beg of you to recollect that it is necessary to proceed with the greatest caution, where possibly the credit of so highly respectable a family as that of the Mildmayes is concerned." And more was added to the same effect.

But all that night, after Louisa had gone

to her room, not to her rest, her mind was in a perfect fever. The strangeness of the circumstances, the novelty, to one in her position, of highly exciting emotions, and the recollection of the wild eccentricity and audacity of Lady Rockforest, had completely overcome her.

When we are in great trouble we often ask ourselves, "Oh! shall this ever terminate? Shall this agonising unhappiness cease—or shall we survive these spasms of torture, these shudderings of the spirit, under which we reel and feel so dizzy? Has God deserted us for ever? Have our offences so outraged Him, have our unthankfulness and worldly mind at last drawn down upon us His final marks of displeasure; and is the cloud never to pass away?" And thus in miserable gloom we writhe and wince, tortured lest the next post bring to us the death of our first-born, or the news of the departure for ever of the loved sister, that played with us between the same green tree, and from whom, perchance, we may have last parted in some foolish fit of anger. Most of us must, at some period of our lives, have experienced such sensations, of which the

most overpowering feeling is, that the fit of anxiety is never to have an end. There are some speculative theologians of a latitudinarian school, who tell us that Hell is not a place of flame and physical suffering, but that it is *only* a scene of mental pain. *Only* mental pain! Oh! dreadful irony! Oh! miserable trifling of speculators in a closet, ignorant of the anguish of the heart, not sensible of the terrible throbbings of despair! *Only* mental torture! And what torture can be more exquisite than when we are kept on the rack of suspense, fearfully alive to the calamity impending, while it would appear like a relief if it burst forth upon us at once, instead of which it seems to keep dropping and dropping down in recurrent instants of agony, while intervening minutes seem to revolve slowly with the dragging tediousness of ages of time?

Some of our readers cannot be wholly unconscious of having experienced such anguish, and THEY can appreciate the folly of trying to diminish the terrors of Hell, by saying that it is a place of only mental torture. May such of our readers as have

never experienced the feelings we have described continue to be free from them to the end of their lives !

That night Louisa had no sleep. She rose from her bed by fits and starts, but from wearied nature she fell asleep again. When she got up in the morning the sun was streaming into her room, and the autumnal morning was cheerful after the late wild weather. The landscape presented the aspect of the last visit of autumn, and at such seasons the brightness of nature has something almost as affecting as the sombreness of a still later period.

The family had not yet risen, and when Louisa descended she found the breakfast-room unoccupied. She was most anxious to see the morning paper : she hoped to learn some intelligence in it, and she also felt a woman's curiosity to know whether any reports about the extraordinary occurrence had got wind. She pulled the bell, and it was some time before it was answered, and then a female servant entered.

"Could you get me the last paper?" said Louisa. Great was her surprise when

the servant appeared confused at the request. She was answered by,

"Yes, miss!—that is, I mean no, miss. It did not come to-day." And the servant-girl blushed up to her eyes.

"That girl," thought Louisa to herself, "is telling a white lie." And at once unpleasant anticipations seized upon her fancy. Unable to sit quiet, she left her chair, and proceeded in search of the mistress of the house, whose voice she thought that she heard in a distant room. On passing into the corridor that led to the great hall from Mrs. Denham's private morning-room, where the family generally breakfasted, Louisa saw the housekeeper, a keen, sharp-looking woman, standing close to a window, by the side of the nursery governess, engaged in reading a newspaper. Their faces at a glance showed that the subject was one of absorbing interest, so intently were both their faces riveted on the newspaper, while the words "heartless depravity," "cruelty to a beautiful young woman," fell on Louisa's ears. In a minute she was by their side, and she said,

"Oh! pray, is that the paper you are reading?" Its unsoiled look suggested its recent arrival in the country-house.

With a rapid exclamation of sudden surprise both the women started. The housekeeper looked almost as if she had seen a ghost, and immediately went away, without looking behind her, as fast as ever she could. The nursery governess gave a deep and very suggestive "*Oh—h—h—h!*" as if something painfully awkward had occurred. Louisa instinctively seized the paper. At the same moment a door at the end of the passage opened, and Mrs. Denham soon appeared. But Louisa did not stay to meet her, or offer the salutations of the morning. She rushed hastily into an adjoining room, and clutching the paper, glanced over it with eager eyes. At first she saw no paragraph headed "Extraordinary Disappearance of a Young Lady," or "Mysterious Circumstances;" but in turning over one of the sheets her eye was caught by what we shall have to relate in another chapter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUT in the mean while it is natural that the reader should be anxious to learn the fate of Caroline Mildmaye, and to become acquainted with what had befallen her since she was left sleeping at night on the sofa of the parlour of the clergyman's cottage.

The reader will recollect that we mentioned that it was a stormy night. So it was, indeed. It was the first of the equinoctial gales. The wind blew hard, and made the sashes of the windows shake, and the trees bent to and fro between the gale as if they should be brought to the ground every moment. The rustling of the leaves was heard, while numbers of them were

torn off the branches, and, whirling to and fro in the wind, were borne far away. The rain did not come down heavily; it was only once and again that it was driven against the windows; the cold was intense for the season, such as can only, in the language of the farmers, be "brought down" by a good fall of rain.

Poor Caroline was in miserable spirits as she had lain down to rest, though she had derived some comfort from elevating her heart in prayer to the source of Mercy. How long she had been asleep she knew not, when the door opened, and the servant maid slowly put her head inside the door. She had a light in her hand, which she screened from falling on Caroline's eyes, and the latter exclaimed, between half asleep and awake,

"Is that you, Hawkins? What do you want? What is the hour?"

"It is quite early, miss; but I thought that I heard you stirring, and I brought you in a cup of tea to refresh yourself."

"Mr. Mildmays—how is he?—is he sitting up—has he asked for me?" And

Caroline, beginning to waken thoroughly, was in the act of rousing herself, when Hawkins came up close to her, and said,

"Oh! miss, you ought to take some rest; indeed you ought. Mr. Mildmaye is fast asleep, and Nurse Johnson has told me to have no noise made, as the doctor wishes that he should sleep as long as possible; and Nurse Johnson is in the room with him. Will you have a cup of tea, miss?"

And Caroline mechanically held out her hand, and took the teacup from Hawkins. Its warmth gave her for the moment a slight sensation of bodily comfort, and drawing her shawl again over her, she desired the servant to leave her by herself; and turning on the side, she composed herself again to sleep, of which she stood much in need.

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What time had elapsed in the interval between the servant's leaving the room and Caroline's next awakening, the latter could not guess. But she was awake by

a strange sense of locomotion, and found herself by two persons lifted off the sofa where she had been reposing. She had sense enough to feel that she was being carried out through the window that opened out on the garden. The cold air of the night came chillingly over her lightly-clad frame, and the thought that violence was being offered to her person struck terror to her heart. To scream out was rendered impossible, as her mouth was tightly bound across; and a handkerchief or cloth of some kind was cast over the greater part of her face. For a minute more after the first shock of being roused up, she found her body resting on the wooden paling of the garden, while her assaulters paused for a brief space in dragging her across it, and getting over themselves. At the other side of it, and in the by-road, which led close to the rear of the grounds of the cottage, Caroline was not, indeed, permitted to walk, but was fiercely dragged along by the arms, in spite of every resistance which she could make. When roused by the startling terror of her position, her nerve returned

to her for a moment; but when she gave obstinate resistance, she found herself lifted off the ground, and carried for several yards between arms. Before two minutes more had elapsed, she was placed for a few moments standing on her feet, and she heard the noise of horses, as if harnessed to a carriage. Nor was her ear deceived. In another minute she was flung into a double coach, a person got in along with her; some low whispering took place; the steps were thrown up, the door closed, a driver jumped up on the box-seat, and the carriage was rapidly in motion.

It would be difficult to describe the feelings of Caroline Mildmaye at that moment. At first there was something of astonishment mingled with her sensations of terror, but gradually the latter sentiment predominated. Not merely the vague sense of future peril was present to her mind, but she instantaneously recollected the menacing visits that had recently been paid to the cottage. She instinctively felt that there must be some connexion between Lady Rockforest and

those who had seized so suddenly upon her person, and had contrived with so much apparent dexterity to remove her from her cousin's house. Who were they? Were they in the pay of Lady Rockforest? What had she said or done to bring on this violence?

But *whirl—whirl—whirl*—went the wheels of the carriage as it jolted often roughly over the high-road. The night was too dark to see out, though one of Caroline's eyes was uncovered, as the kerchief had slipped down upon her face. In a few minutes the person in the carriage put forward his arms, and Caroline felt the gag loosened across her mouth. She was able to breathe freely, and could almost speak. She tried to make herself heard, and cried out,

“Why is this viol——”

“Hush!” said the voice of the stranger in the carriage. The tone was imperative, and still more so was the accompanying action. The person significantly put a large cold hand on the mouth of Caroline, as if more decisively to suggest to her the necessity for silence. About a minute

after the pace of the carriage diminished for a short time, and the noise of a waggoner "whooping" to his wain was heard. As the vehicle was passing by, there came into the carriage window a gleam from the waggoner's lantern, which flashed in aslant, and glanced against the side of the carriage opposite to that on which Caroline was seated. She started with horror, and every nerve in her body quivered with fear, as she beheld seated opposite to her a figure in a mask !

The mere sight of the masked form frightened Caroline more than the previous violence offered to her by the forcible removal. She had been stunned at first : she was now almost stupified with terror. She screamed, or rather tried to do so, but at the first note of the shriek she found herself seized by strength superior to her own, and her mouth again was gagged. Desperation took possession of her, but she found that her physical force was over-matched, and that there was no chance of her escape. Her arms were bound tightly again, and she was held down by great strength in the corner of the carriage. She

was almost suffocated with the gag across her mouth; her heart palpitated as if it was about to burst, and the veins in her temples throbbed. Possibly she might have died in a few moments more if relief had not been given to her. As soon as her arms were again fastened the gag was removed from her mouth, and she breathed less convulsively; but her terror was undiminished, as the carriage continued to roll far and far away beyond the reach of aid.

She was again about to talk, but a peremptory command in a hoarse voice, and a tightening of the strap by which she was fastened, compelled her to silence. She was cowed, and felt almost paralysed; she was stupified as well as stunned. She was not just then aware that she had been drugged, and that the first violence offered to her on that memorable evening was in a cup with narcotic which the woman Hawkins had persuaded her to take. Yet dulled and drowsy as her confused head felt, she again made another frantic effort, and with vain desperation tried to burst her bonds; but her strength failed her,

weakness came over her, and she fell back into the corner of the carriage, faint, prostrated, and utterly dismayed.

How long she continued in this state she could not guess, but when she regained her senses she found the carriage still moving, but not so rapidly as before. The road seemed to be much rougher, and the vehicle jolted uneasily from side to side. The jerking of the carriage, as well as the drug which, unconsciously, she had swallowed, made her sick, and the nausea added to her exhaustion. She became passive, and physically, if not mentally, subdued, and her sensations of terror were less poignant from the dull drowsiness that weighed upon her.

After continuing for some time in this state, she was suddenly roused by the carriage stopping, and she heard the noise of voices, as if in parley. The sound of a gate being swung back also reached her ears, and for a moment a faint gleam of light twinkled near, but it seemed instantaneously withdrawn. The carriage was soon in motion again, and in two or three minutes afterwards the window at the left side of

Caroline was let down, and the cold air, though it came in with chilling effect, helped to freshen her. She heard the rustling of leaves, as if they were travelling near large trees, and the carriage-way was smoother than it had been previously. The rain had ceased ; but the wind blew against the carriage in strong gusts, and it rose and fell with a melancholy sighing. Caroline caught, also, another noise borne on its tones, and she felt her body becoming chiller. Suddenly the moonlight burst for a brief passing moment through the clouds overhead. Its light was faint and flickering, but after the close darkness of the carriage it had the power of startling contrast ; and Caroline at a glance caught sight of a vast piece of water, whose waves, crested with white foam, were lashed to and fro by the violence of the wind. The moonlight flickered across the dark heaving surface with a lurid and uncertain light. Sometimes the prospect was obscured from the view, but still, above the noise of the trotting horses and the whirling of the wheels, was heard the splashing of the angry waters ; while now and again

in the dimly-twinkling light the flashes of the crested breakers breaking into spray could be plainly seen. And then for a few brief instants a burst of moonlight would show the extent of the tossing surface, over which it shone with almost supernatural effect. There was something awfully drear and tragical in the sight of those angry waves, over which the night-wind, like a demon-spirit, howled in angry blasts.

At first Caroline thought that she was passing along the bank of a large river, and she knew that the river M—— flowed within the neighbourhood of Dryford. But almost instinctively the recollection of "The Black Pool" in Catesby Court passed across her mind, and she felt convinced that she was now within the power of Lady Rockforest. Little time was given for reflection on the point. As if by a sudden jerk, the carriage was brought to a stand, a cloth was cast over her face so that she could not see, the door was immediately opened, the steps were let down, and Caroline was compelled to descend. For a moment she was left standing, and her exhaustion was so great that she fell

flat upon the ground. "Up with her at once!" cried the same hoarse voice again. And she felt herself raised between arms, and by the noise made by the tramping feet she knew that the persons who held her were ascending a long flight of steps. Soon she was, for a moment, put standing again, and she heard a door shut behind her, and the whispering of two or three voices fell upon her ear. "Go on—go on!" cried the same voice; and in a few moments more she knew that she was again ascending another staircase. She felt herself as if carried up four successive flights; she could distinguish by the brief intervals that she had passed several landings, and at last she found herself carried for several yards on a level surface, as if the bearers were traversing a lobby. They entered a room, and scarcely had she entered it, when she heard a horribly demoniacal laugh, immediately followed by a cry of "Hush! hush!" Then again a door was opened; the hoarse voice cried, "In with her!" And Caroline felt herself almost flung into a room, while at the same time the straps by which she was bound were rapidly un-

loosed, and as she was pushed forward into a brightly-lighted chamber, the cloth over her head was twitched off, and the door closed behind her back.

When the words "In with her!" had been uttered, Caroline had shuddered, as she thought of being precipitated into some place for assassination; and terrified though she was, she felt some relief in finding herself in a lighted room. At first, dazzled by the light, she could not see for several minutes; in her weakness she had staggered to a small sofa, on which she lay, panting and bewildered. Again she heard the horrid laugh outside the door, and she felt terror-stricken. The circumstances were enough to appal any woman; and we are bound to add, that the nerves of Caroline Mildmaye were not only depressed by the influence of the drug which she had unconsciously swallowed, but she had been previously exhausted by her anxieties and nurse-tending of her invalid kinsman. Still, in a few minutes she began gradually to recover her courage to a considerable extent; and though still fearfully alarmed at the nature of the

fate in reserve for her, the fact of being alone in the chamber, with uncovered face and unbound arms, enabled her to breathe more freely. Even her first glance at the chamber was reassuring, for there seemed little, at first, that was horrible in its appearance.

The room was extremely small. It was little more than a large closet, triangular in shape, and quaintly wainscoted. Its antique aspect at once struck the eye: an oval mirror was let into the wall; the chimney-piece was very large for so small a room, and it was quaintly ornamented with strange devices. Upon the hearth there burned a wood fire, and a pile of beech logs lay in a strangely-shaped old scuttle. There was only one window in the room, but there seemed to be a second door in the wainscoting. A solitary picture was over the fireplace; but the eyes of Caroline Mildmaye rested neither on the portrait nor on the massive silver candlestick, which held a piece of wax-light.

On a peg in the wainscoting was hung up a man's hat, while on a small table under it was an object which riveted her

gaze. She was not mistaken; it was a pistol. She shuddered as it met her eyes, for she associated it with some further deed of violence against her person. Agonised by terror, she flung herself upon her knees, and when the doomed vessel settles down to sink, foundering in the fathomless sea, never did hapless voyager more fervently pray for mercy to the Awful One who then reveals himself with terrible distinctness, than Caroline Mildmaye appealed for help to Heaven. Then, too, she felt some pangs of anguish and self-upbraiding, as conscience told her that she had often been unthankful, that the chastening which had been extended to her on her father's death had not been humbly enough received, and that the pride of station, and the vanities of life, with all its glittering bubbles, had occupied her world-adoring heart. Tears of anguish and compunction streamed from her eyes as the thought of the devotion she had paid to all the gaieties of fashionable life rushed across her mind with smiting force. What dreadful experiences there were in these few moments! What an astounding

change of her soul, as the prospect of sudden and violent entry into eternity, or even of something worse than instant death, horribly rose before her mind! The sight of the man's hat and the pistol had put more dreadful suggestions into her head than the long drive in the carriage, and the violence used in removing her.

She seemed to have been left entirely to herself in that part of the mansion, and the echoes of the appalling laugh, that made her heart palpitate, now came very faintly to her ear. Then, for the first time, she perceived that the apartment smelt of tobacco; and, as her eyes caught the sight of a pair of man's boots, huddled into one of the corners of the chamber, she felt almost as prostrate as before, while horrible conceptions of what might befall her chased each other like dreadful phantoms across her quailing mind. The wind whistled along the passages that led to her chamber with long-drawn, melancholy noise. She could feel its chill blasts penetrating under the large, old-fashioned door, and despite of the warmth of the chamber, an icy chillness seized her limbs.

CHAPTER XIX.

FOR nearly half an hour Caroline thus remained without any one approaching her. The distant noise of doors being shut reached her from time to time, and once she thought that she had heard voices in altercation outside the house. But her feelings were too excited to listen with attention, and the sound which struck her ears most plainly during the intervals when the wind ceased howling, was the throbbing of her palpitating heart.

While trembling with fear, the ear of Caroline was arrested by the striking of a large clock, that appeared to be some way from the mansion. How ominously its reverberations sounded through the silence

of the night, as each stroke fell upon her nervous ears. She counted distinctly, for the clock struck with singular slowness; and as eleven tolled, followed by a dead silence, she felt an awful sense of loneliness, her nerves became violently agitated, and she felt herself shaking with fear.

Again she fell upon her knees and tried to pray to Heaven, but this time she was unable to compose herself sufficiently to address the Divinity. A feverish agitation seized at once upon her mind, as well as body. The solemn silence, unbroken save by the gusts of the wind, was insupportably awful to her, after the excitement which she had previously gone through. She felt no doubt that she was reserved for some fearful outrage, and her imagination pictured horrors which almost froze her heart with fear. She rushed in frenzied spirit to the door by which she had entered, but it was shut from the outside, and could not be opened. She then rushed to the other door, which opened from the wainscot, and grasped the handle of its antique lock, but it also

resisted her pressure. She screamed aloud—once, and twice, and thrice—but the echoes of her voice died away, and there was no notice taken of the noise that she had made. She felt in a state of desperation, and the pride of the Mildmayes, resentful of such a grave indignity as had been put upon her, struggled for ascendancy with the passion of womanly apprehension. She felt enraged as well as frightened.

She paced to and fro with short and rapid steps; her chest heaved with emotion, as the intolerable sense of her confinement goaded her with torture. The sight of the man's hat and boots, and the pistol, appalled her with apprehensions that took the form most terrible to the female imagination, and, frantic with horror, she fell back senseless on the old-fashioned sofa, near which she was standing.

She remained in a swoon for several minutes. Her first returning consciousness was vague and dreamlike. She felt no physical pain, nor any discomfort beyond a heavy drowsiness that weighed

down her eyelids. She saw the light burning on the table, and her first impression was that she was in Eustace's cottage, and that she had fallen asleep after dinner, as had been the case on more than one occasion with her after her unusual toils and prolonged vigils in nursing her invalid cousin. But in an instant she started from her recumbent posture, as an ear-piercing shriek electrified her with its sound. In an instant the reality of her position was before her. There were the light, the blazing fire, the antique chamber, the quaintly-panelled wainscoting. Ha! that shriek again! and again! and again! How terribly it sounded through the silence of the night. How dreadfully, in the solitude of that dread abode, it sunk into a long melancholy wail, as if misery was trying to echo the voice of horror. Stouter hearts than that of Caroline Mildmaye might have shrunk at hearing that appalling cry.

Again and again its dreadful intonations were heard, and soon Caroline's ears caught the noise of some one, as if running rapidly along the corridor. She

the noise of a door slammed violently, and the steps seemed to be approaching in the direction of her chamber. She listened with trembling anxiety, but the footsteps did not come nearer; they appeared as if receding in another direction. Again—again that horrible scream sounded, but now it seemed fainter and less near than before, as if it came from an apartment still further removed.

While Caroline stood listening with feverish alarm to these awful sounds, the succeeding silence was broken by the clock striking. It struck one, and this with awful distinctness—two—then three, and as each stroke fell Caroline knew that the hour of midnight was being tolled. She counted each stroke, and twelve was struck with a funereal solemnity, and Caroline almost fancied that some dreadful apparition would burst upon her vision. But it was another sense than that of sight by which alarm was to be conveyed to her at that midnight hour. Not very many minutes had elapsed from the last stroke of the clock, when Caroline distinctly heard heavy footsteps approaching

along the corridor. They sounded with a heavy tramp, and as they gradually came nearer and nearer, Caroline felt that the crisis of her case was approaching. Her mind was so excited and overwrought at the time, that she really did not know what she was expecting; but her heart throbbed under the consciousness of some horrible fate hanging over her. As the steps came nearer and nearer her terror increased. None but a man could stamp in that heavy manner, and who and what could be the person that was just then approaching her chamber?

The handle of the door from the corridor (as it seemed to be) was turned; but it seemed that the door was locked, and that the visitor had not the key. In another minute Caroline heard the door of the adjoining room opened, and the steps approached to the opening in the wainscoting. There was a pause for a moment or two. Caroline Mildmaye's feelings were then wound up into a state of paroxysm. Her heart jumped in her breast as the door was struck once—twice—and thrice—with a loud, bold knock.

The sense of her extraordinary situation— isolated from her friends—the sights which she had seen, the noises which she had heard, received their very climax of intimidating effect in these three loud knocks given with alarming distinctness on the door-panel.

In another moment the door slowly opened, and the terrible face of the woman Ullathorne met the gaze of Caroline Mildmaye. There she stood in the doorway, hard, fearful, and forbidding, as if her memory was loaded with the knowledge of some dreadful deed, or as if she was intent on the commission of some dark act, requiring craft and audacity. She was habited in a velvet dress; a large gold chain, curiously inwrought, hung round her; and a rich lace collar encircled her neck; her fingers sparkled with rings, and rich bracelets were on either wrist. Her velvet robe was girdled round her waist with a tasselled cord of silk, and an amethyst brooch fastened her lace collar to her breast. In her right hand she had a massive silver lamp, which she held up high from the floor, and the light

of the lamp flashed brightly over the glittering ornaments of her person, while it showed with grim distinctness the sinister lineaments of her peculiar and repulsive countenance.

She stood for a minute or two in the doorway, looking sternly at Caroline. She then entered into the closet, and closed the door after her ; and, placing the lamp upon the table, advanced towards Caroline, who was so petrified with fear that she could hardly speak. Then drawing a chair from the wall, Mrs. Ullathorne sat down, and continued to scrutinise the countenance of Caroline.

“Mrs. Ullathorne!” faintly murmured the latter, recognising her visitor as the personage who had poured out such imprecations on Eustace.

“Yes ! Miss Mildmaye, we have met before. You know my name well enough, and of course your babbling, chattering cousin has spoken often enough about me to you. But he shall be sorry enough for that. We have a knack in this house of punishing people who betray secrets, as you shall learn before you are many days

older. Dear me ! how frightened the poor little thing is ! Why, positively, it's all in a tremble. It's shaking with fear." And Mrs. Ullathorne laughed heartily, and unclosing her lips, disclosed two rows of sharp and long teeth, while her eyes flashed with a peculiar expression that made the heart of Caroline Mildmaye quail with fear.

"Ha ! ha !" laughed Mrs. Ullathorne, with bitter glee, "and so your cousin told you all about Mrs. Ullathorne. Nay, you need not tremble so : I am not going to devour you. Why, you could not be more frightened if I was a man ! Ah ! ha ! how pale she gets at the name of a man ! I suppose, my dear, you would be in a state of mental terror if you found yourself at this time of night in a room with a man ? His being in woman's clothes would not make him less terrible to you, my pretty, timid little child that you are." And as she spoke these words, Mrs. Ullathorne gave a malicious chuckle, while her countenance assumed a sort of aspect which terrified Caroline more than aught that had occurred to her that night.

At that instant a conjecture, sufficiently alarming, flashed across the mind of Caroline. There was that in the expression of Mrs. Ullathorne's face, in those glittering eyes, that peculiar gaze, that sturdy form, which suggested the notion that the person in the room with her was a man in female disguise. The next words that came from the lips of her visitor confirmed the suspicion.

"Now, give a guess, my pretty one: am I a man or not?" And the person before her stretched out the right hand, and familiarly chucked Caroline under the chin. Caroline started back towards the corner, indignant at the insult offered to her; but feelings of terror were then predominant over those of shame. An icy sensation, as if her blood was freezing, passed over her heart, and she was in that state of fear that death would have been a relief to her at the moment.

Changing from the affectedly insinuating expression, the countenance of the person called Ullathorne then assumed a fiercer aspect. Again the glittering white teeth

were concealed from view behind the tightly-closed lips. The brow contracted, the face assumed a stern and gloomy aspect. Rising from the chair, Caroline's visitor went over to the door that opened on the corridor, and listened attentively, and then returned back. At that moment, Caroline Mildmaye was standing near the sofa, speechless with terror. She was completely cowed by the gaze of Ullathorne. The terrible was stamped upon that person's face; the mark of the Evil One seemed imprinted on that brow. The feeling that it was a man who was in the room with her, the loneliness of the place, and the silence of the hour, caused Caroline to shudder at what awaited her. This feeling of apprehension was further excited as Ullathorne, returning to the chair, as if confident that no one was coming to disturb them, bending a penetrating look upon Caroline, in a half-whisper exclaimed,

"Yes! pretty Caroline—panting, frightened, fearful little Caroline—you shall find a husband before long. We shall have no babblers—no chattering parsons

in our family. We do not want our secrets to be told to the whole country. So Mr. Mildmaye thought that he could get hold of our secrets with impunity! To be sure, what a silly fool often is your pious parson! Ha! ha! Keep our secrets, and do what he liked with them. No! no! We're not such simpletons in this house as that. There were many secrets in this old house when the Thoresbys had it, and the Catesbys have their own share of private doings, about which a censorious world must not be too easily gratified. We'll take care of that, and hush those pretty little mouths that would reveal family secrets to the public."

"I know no secret," said Caroline: "I have no secret of any person's in my keeping. I am innocent of betraying anything."

"Oh! of course, my pretty young lady—of course you and your sweetheart Eustace had no private conversations about Lady Rockforest and her confidential friend Ullathorne. Oh! not you! Of course you never conversed at all about us! Just so, Miss Slyboots, with all your

sweet trembling sensibility! La! how you do tremble!"

And Caroline certainly did then quiver like an aspen, as the eyes of Ullathorne concentrated their odious gaze upon her, and as the wicked face grew grim with menacing fierceness.

"But," continued Ullathorne, "you shall get another husband, perhaps, who will keep family secrets better than Mr. Eustace Mildmaye. In this very house you shall make a better match than ever you aspired to. Nay! my pretty girl, you need not look so frightened——"

Just at that moment a loud knocking was heard, as if at the hall-door. In an instant Ullathorne jumped off the chair, and the face, though not losing its habitual look of audacity, assumed an appearance of anxiety. Presently a violent ringing took place, and the brow of Ullathorne contracted with gloomy severity. Snatching up the lamp, and replacing the poniard inside the robe, Caroline's dreaded visitor stalked towards the door and opened it. Then, before passing through it, Ullathorne, turning round, gave Caroline a

steady look, the eyes shining like fire-balls, and, slowly shutting it, stalked away. And Caroline heard the steps quickly receding from her room and echoing along the corridor.

The noise of the bell and of the knocking had given a momentary relief to Caroline. It changed her sensations; and as in music the alternation of a key produces effect upon the ear, so when the mind is intensely overwrought a slight incident gives relief to the sufferer. But in this case the relief was but momentary. Caroline's reflections taught her at once that if any assistance had come to her, it would soon come to her room. But she listened, and there was no sound of altercation or expostulation to reach her ears. Again and again she listened, and she could catch no sound of coming aid. Then the words of Ullathorne recurred to her with frightful distinctness—the threat of a forced marriage—the grim pleasantry of puzzling Caroline over the question of the sex of Ullathorne—the certainty that she had fallen into wicked hands—the dread of the shunned Lady Rockforest, and apprehensions of her malignity came upon

Caroline with overwhelming effect. In such a state of mind any species of action is a relief to the overpowered faculties, and Caroline resolved, if possible, to go out of the room and descend to the hall, if she could find it, though at the same time she had not any distinct idea before her mind of being able to make her escape. But the side-door in the wainscoting was closed, like the other entrance into the cabinet, and she was unable to open it from the inside. The sense of being thus enclosed, as if in a cage, almost drove her into desperation; her languor changed into frenzy; her torture of spirit gave her the frantic violence of fever. She wildly walked round and round the room, and then became violently hysterical, while her eyes were blinded with tears. Again she tried to pray, and again she failed in doing so; her intellect began to wander, and then, from the bursts of her agony, she passed into the lassitude of utter prostration of soul.

The locked doors—the man's clothes in the apartment—the pistol—these things, with terrible vividness, were present to her mind. She made up her mind at once

that Ullathorne, the person who had been with her, and whose dreadful effect upon the nerves of Eustace Mildmaye she had witnessed, was a man. On that point she entertained no doubt. For what object he had assumed female disguise she could not conjecture, but it was evidently with some evil intent.

And the secret! What possibly could it be? It must be of some awful importance, since such alarm appeared evident upon Ullathorne's face at the notion of its being discovered. What could it be about?—and why should Caroline be held responsible for Eustace's doings? These and similar questions were rapidly raised in Caroline's mind; but her brain was so excited, her senses so bewildered, that she formed no definite opinion on any of them. What time had passed after Ullathorne had left the room, she could not fancy, when again her heart was appalled with the sound of the same wild shriek of agony that she had heard before. This time it seemed to come from some remoter place, but was heard with fearful distinctness at the small cabinet where Caroline was confined.

CHAPTER XX.

HALF-CRAZED with fear, Caroline again rushed to the door to try and find an egress. The sense of being so imprisoned had become overpowering. She rushed at the door, and endeavoured to open it. Ullathorne had thought that the door was shut, but the bolt was only half shot, and to Caroline's surprise it gave way upon pressure. The room beyond was dark, and Caroline feared that some danger was imminent, and that possibly the door had been left thus loosely fastened to precipitate her fate. Then, for the first time that night, the energy and moral qualities of Caroline came into play,—then, for the first time, was the courage which she boasted of restored to her. That open

door—the chance of a struggle for her life and for her honour—roused her energy of spirit. The influence of the stupifying drug which she had unconsciously swallowed had passed off, and her strength of soul again returned. She was entirely unaware of the reason why she had felt so stupified previously, and why her vigour had then been restored to her. She resolved to confront the peril whatever may it be, and took up the candle on the table, advancing to the door; then suddenly recollecting herself, she fell down upon her knees, and prayed with intense fervour to Heaven for its aid. Her mind then did not wander; on the contrary, it felt invigorated, and her self-possession seemed restored.

Thus partly reassured, she again advanced to the door, and stood listening for a while before she ventured to pass through. She could not distinguish anything stirring in the room, and resolved to advance into it. Not, however, without much trepidation did she cross the threshold into the outer room. With trembling eagerness she cast her eyes around.

She found herself in a carpeted chamber of moderate dimensions. It was fitted up as a sleeping apartment, and an old-fashioned sofa-bed occupied a corner. The whole appearance of the furniture was antique, but it was not mouldering with age, and the apartment had an appearance even of comfort in it. She was caught by some large black object near the fireplace, which she soon recognised to be an old portmanteau, that apparently had been much knocked about the world. Hanging up against the wall was a man's great-coat, and some miscellaneous articles of male apparel were flung around the room. There had apparently been a fire recently in the grate, and the room looked as if it had been lately occupied. Caroline's sense of pressing peril became greater than ever, but her energy rose for the time with the occasion; and, though terribly frightened at the sight of the man's trunk, which recalled the notion that Ullathorne was a man, and that she was in his power, she felt at heart a desperate resolution forcing her on, if possible, to make her escape from her impri-

sonment, and she determined to dare her fate at once.

Then the question suggested itself, whether she should leave the candle in the apartment, or whether she should grope her way to the ground-floor? Without the light she could not hope to see her way, and with it she would run the risk of being more quickly discovered. At that instant, the chances for or against her escape from thralldom she never calmly considered, but felt simply that any course was preferable to being tortured by agonising suspense. Nerving herself to the trial, she opened the door of the bed-chamber, and as she did so a cold blast of wind came along what seemed to be a long gallery or corridor. She had just time to see that the room in which she had been confined was apparently in a corner of the mansion, as a large window was close upon her left hand, against which the rain-drops beat with violence. Stretching away upon her right appeared a long corridor, upon which several rooms seemed to open. She placed her hand before the flame of the candle to screen it from the wind, and traversed the corridor.

It was of considerable length, and if she had the least doubt before, she might then have felt convinced that the large mansion in which she stood could only be that of Catesby Court, of which she had often heard so much. She shuddered as she felt the cold night-blast in the corridor, and as she heard the noise of the storm which raged with violence outside. But onward she went, and passed four or five doors on either side, when she came to a large lobby, from which a great double staircase descended. Just as she arrived at the head of the great staircase a blast of wind, sweeping upwards, extinguished her light, and she found herself in utter darkness. Not a sound was heard at the moment through all that large house; not another noise fell upon Caroline's ear save that of the hurricane, which seemed to rage outside with almost tropical violence.

Lured on by the strange fascination that impels human nature in hours of peril, Caroline prepared to descend the staircase in the dark. Just as her foot was on the first step of it, she thought that she heard the breathing of some person near her, and she was on the point

of screaming out. But she fortunately checked herself; and though she could hear her heart audibly palpitating, she made a desperate effort to be composed. She extended her hand against the wall, and leant upon it for a moment. Then again recovering her nerve, she prepared to descend.

At the very first step she took the staircase creaked audibly, and the noise alarmed her; but she recovered herself sufficiently to advance another step or two, and she listened with tremulous anxiety. The roar of the storm continued, and while descending still lower, she was startled by an intensely vivid flash of lightning, which seemed to blaze for a moment, and revealed to her the sight of a large window, apparently on the landing of the great staircase. She saw the balustrade of the stairs, and some pictures hanging on the wall. There was something truly terrible in the vividness of the lightning, and something still more horrible in the awful darkness which succeeded it. Caroline was shaking with fear; the rain beat hard against the panes

of the great window near her, and the wind howled outside with doleful weirdness, as if it were chanting the lullaby of some storm-fiend.

Yet Caroline continued to descend. Her mind was beginning to wander. She had at the moment no definite idea whatever as to what she meant to do. She could not stop to reflect; crazed with alarm, terror-struck at what had happened to her, she was wholly unequal to the task of deliberate reflection. A tremendous and overpowering sense of peril had seized upon her spirit, and she did she knew not what. Some strange supernatural instinct seemed to goad her along, and she continued to descend, she knew not whither.

She had arrived at the first landing-place of the stairs on her descent downwards, and, groping her way, she continued to proceed. She had gone down several steps of the second stairs, when another flash of brilliant lightning illuminated all the place. She started at its excessive vividness, which enabled her, however, to see her position more clearly. Her eyes could not altogether have de-

ceived her, that right opposite to her was another window, through which she saw the lightning outside, and that she was descending upon a lobby she was convinced. She had not time to think of what dread danger impended over her, when a crash of thunder burst overhead, as if the skies aloft had been rent asunder, and some bolt of vengeance had just been hurled upon the house. Heard by day, such a peal might have made the nerves of a stouter heart to quail ; heard by night in that lone scene, and in that defenceless position, it was no wonder that Caroline quaked with horror, and that her senses were stupified with fear.

Totally unnerved, she sank down upon the stairs, and leant against the great banisters. Her voice seemed to leave her, and even if she wished to scream, she felt as if she was paralysed. She listened with the agony of desperation, expecting every moment that some strong grasp would seize her, and that some savage act of violence would be executed upon her. A cold draught of wind came whistling up the stairs ; her teeth chattered in her head,

and she felt about to swoon. The storm raged on outside with apparently increased violence, and the windows on the stairs and on the lobby rattled violently in their frames.

While thus overcome with terror, and vacillating as to whether she should return or not, she heard a distant door on the right hand opening, and turning her head towards it, she beheld the glimmering of a light. It appeared to be at the end of a long corridor, and soon she saw it coming in motion in her direction. It moved slowly, and was borne up high over the ground. Caroline strained her eyes to catch a clear view of whom or what was approaching. She could only discern that some dark figure, apparently very tall, was striding slowly onwards. She could not see whether it was woman or man; and her senses were then so strained with aching feelings of terror, that, unconsciously to herself, she almost expected that some supernatural form would have startled her with its appalling presence. Onward it came with dreadful certainty, slowly, and slower still,

and still it appeared to come nearer; yet Caroline could see no face, and all that she could see was a dark tall figure moving onwards towards her, with a lamp up-lifted in its hand.

Again a vivid flash of lightning seemed to light up the whole place for an instant. It was succeeded by a crash of thunder ominously near, and Caroline saw the figure stop for a moment, while the echoes of the thunder died away, and then the light came nearer and nearer, and it was now not many feet away from the spot where Caroline was crouching in horror. As it came nearer, the figure seemed muttering to itself; and when it came within a few yards of Caroline, she could perceive that a dark veil partly covered the face of the dread form, which now was close to where she stood. A loose drapery of some sort wrapped the figure from head to foot.

Still it continued to mutter something which Caroline could not catch, and soon it reached the spot where the corridor crossed the great lobby upon which the staircase descended. The wind coming up

the staircase made the lamp flicker to and fro, and blew aside the black garb. A wasted and attenuated hand was put forth by the figure to screen the lamp from the wind, and, standing motionless, the stranger seemed anxious to prevent the light from being extinguished. While doing so, part of the lamp, as if an extinguisher, fell off, and it rolled towards the direction of the stairs where Caroline was crouching in consternation.

"Curse upon this odious lamp!" cried a hoarse and husky voice, whose echoes vibrated in that lone place. "The devil himself must be about to-night, if there be a devil, for everything goes wrong."

And then the figure stooped to look where the extinguisher had rolled. It was near Caroline's feet. But if worlds had been given to her, she could not stir from where she crouched. She longed to rise, but she could not stir an inch. Spell-bound and stupified with terror, she shrank appalled as the dark figure approached nearer and nearer, and came close up to the very end of the stairs, where it stood, as if about to search for what had fallen.

Just as the black figure came close to the stairs it recognised the person of Caroline, and started back a step or two, holding up the light. The veil at the same moment fell back from the face, and disclosed to view the features, pale as death, of her whose name for so many years had been linked in Caroline Mildmaye's mind with so many guilty associations—the miserable and hapless Lady Rockforest.

END OF VOL. II.



